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WHIP-KING JOE.

WHIP-KING JOE THE BOY RANCHERO BY O. L. COOMES

CHAPTER I.

THE SKELETON IN THE GRASS.

CALM and placid as the summer sky above, Fawn Lake lay on the broad breast of the great prairie, its glassy surface unblurred by a single breeze. It was a tiny sheet of water—rather a peculiar freak of nature—nestled there upon the great plain—entirely encircled with a narrow strip of golden sand, and the whole surrounded by a belt of cottonwood timber.

A fierce August sun beat down upon the lakelet. The yellow beach fairly blazed with the solar heat. The green foliage on the cottonwoods hung limp and shriveled. Not a breath of air was stirring, not a sound was audible, not a sign of life was visible. Fawn Lake, at that hour, seemed to have been the very center of desolation itself; but as the hours wore away and the sun sunk westward, and a gentle breeze began to cool the flushed face of day, the cry of a blue-jay and the flutter of wings broke the stillness of the grove, and shortly afterward a number of birds came to disport themselves in mid-air over the limpid waters of the lakelet. And, still a few minutes later, a deer, followed by a timid fawn came from the woods, and

with a cautious step walked down to the water's edge. She was panting with heat, and wading into the lake a few paces slaked her thirst, then with her fore-foot began pawing the water, splashing it over herself and her fawn, which shrunk close to her side trembling with fear; and not until her spotted baby had been thoroughly drenched in the cooling liquid did she desist from her sportive work. Then, with an air of satisfaction, she walked out upon the beach, shook the water from her body, and started for the woods.

She was half-across the yellow strip of sand when she suddenly stopped, sniffed the air with alarm, and then, with a note of warning to her fawn, bounded away into the timber.

A few seconds later the object of the mother deer's alarm emerged from the grove. It was a horse, having upon it a bridle and saddle, but it was riderless. It was a clean-limbed, spirited-looking animal. It seemed suffering from thirst, for, at sight of the lake, it dashed furiously forward and plunging into the water belly-deep, drank voraciously. When its thirst was satisfied, it turned about and began retracing its steps. It moved along at a brisk walk through the shady aisles of the woods and out into the green prairie beyond. On and on it went, for nearly two miles, never once wavering in its course.

Finally it came to and crossed an old Indian trail running away from the Platte valley toward the northwest. It now moved along more leisurely, stopping ever and anon to crop the green, luxuriant grass. In this way it continued on until it came to where the grass had been eaten and trampled as if by an animal that had been tethered there. In the center of this spot was a bunch of tall grass that had not been molested, and straight toward this the horse made its way. Stopping there it thrust its nose down into the grass, and uttered a low, gentle whinny.

Instantly a human hand—a hand with long, skeleton-like fingers—was raised from the grass and caressingly passed over the animal's nose; at the same time a feeble voice addressed it kindly.

With apparent satisfaction the animal now turned and walked away across the trampled grass and began cropping that beyond.

An hour went by. The sun slowly sunk in the west, yet it wanted two hours of night when the horse suddenly raised his head, looked out across the plain, gave a snort of alarm, then turning, trotted back to the clump of grass within the trodden circle.

A party of eight horsemen, riding in Indian file along the trail before mentioned, was the cause of the animal's sudden alarm.

At the head of the little cavalcade rode a man whose very looks betokened the prairie outlaw. He was of perhaps forty years, rather stoutly built, with a rough, bearded face, that wore a cold, cruel expression. He was dressed and armed in a style characteristic of the prairie freebooter of that day.

The second person in the file was a woman—a young girl of perhaps seventeen, whose sad face and tearful eyes told that she was a captive in the power of the outlaw and the six painted and plumed savage warriors that rode behind.

Evidently the party had ridden a long distance under the fierce blaze of that August sun, for their horses seemed jaded and worn.

The fair-faced captive sat with her eyes bent downward, taking no notice of things around her. There was a hopeless, despairing look upon her face, and she sat her horse as if wearied almost to death with her long ride. Her captors rode along, sullen and silent—no word being spoken for hours: but, suddenly, all began to talk in an excited manner, and raising her eyes she saw the object of their commotion—a riderless horse on the plain some distance before them.

As soon as the outlaw approached near enough to see that there was a saddle and bridle on the horse, he ordered a halt, saying:

"There's somebody round thar, Pawnees, for that horse's saddled."

"Ugh! pale-face, mebbey," replied an Indian.

"Yas, it may be some blamed scout."

"Better see fore go funder," advised the red-skin.

After a moment's parley the outlaw and a savage rode on ahead to investigate.

As they approached the riderless horse it began running around the clump of grass, in which evidently lay its master, in an excited manner.

With his hand on his revolver the outlaw

rode on. The horse shied away as they approached.

"The critter acts durned queer," said the outlaw, drawing rein.

Just then a faint groan fell on his ears, and urging his horse forward, the villain rode alongside the clump of grass whence the sound came. Leaning over in his stirrups he gazed down into the grass, and as he did so a cry of surprise burst from his lips, for his eyes met the wild, sunken orbs of a prostrate form glaring up at him from a ghastly face.

"By the eternals!" burst from the outlaw's lips, as he hastily dismounted, "thar's an ugly mess o' humanity in here, I'll swear thar is. Hullo! stranger, what the all-fired nation does this ere mean?"

"Oh, Lord!" groaned the man in the grass, in feeble accents.

"Bout a goner, ar'n't you? Can't ye git up?" questioned the outlaw.

"No, no," replied the man.

"Who be you, anyhow?"

"Paul Sackett."

"Paul Sackett, eh?" repeated the outlaw, and a shadow passed over his brow; "I've heard o' him before—in fact, his name is familiar, and his acts are old acquaintances. But, what appears to be the matter of you, Sackett?"

"I'm sick—I fell faint here from my horse, and have been lyin' here under the broilin' sun, burnin' up with fever, starvin' for food and famishin' for water."

"How long have you been here?"

"Don't know, stranger; I've been out of my head a good deal, but it seems to me it's been a month, and I'm 'bout dead."

"I should say so," replied the outlaw, indifferently; "but say, what was you doin' up hereaways, anyhow?"

The man made no reply. His breath came quick and short, and his eyes looked wild and glassy.

"Why don't you answer my question?" demanded the outlaw, after a moment's hesitation.

"Paul Sackett's an independent ranger," the sick man finally answered.

"I know it," replied the interlocutor, "and sick and on the verge of the grave though you be, Paul Sackett, I believe you're lyin' like a trooper. Come, we'll help you onto your hoss and over to the lake whar we intend to camp for the night. That'll be a good deal for me to do for you instead o' blowin' your brains out, for I haven't forgot the job Paul Sackett put up on my friends down at Abaline. And it's not to save your life that I'll stoop to help ye, either, but I'm bound to know what you're after up hereaways, if I have to carry ye clear to the Pawnee village. Come now, I'll help you."

He bent over the man and assisted him to rise to a sitting posture.

The Indian with some difficulty caught the sick man's horse and led him up to where his master sat. Then the outlaw raised the feeble man in his strong arms as though he were a child and placed him in his saddle. He looked more like a corpse than a living being. His face and hands were almost like those of a skeleton. His eyes were sunken, wild and glassy. His lips were drawn tight, showing plainly his white teeth. Evidently he was a young man. His face was covered with a thin growth of dark beard that only served to reveal the ghastly outlines of his emaciated face all the more distinctly. His hair was also thin, long and unkempt. In his belt was a small revolver that the outlaw did not trouble himself to remove.

The Indian, riding ahead, led the sick man's horse. The outlaw rode at the latter's side, supporting him in his saddle, for he was so weak that he could not keep his head erect.

In this way they joined the main party and at sight of the ghastly face of the stranger and the feverish glare of his sunken eyes, the captive girl's heart grew sick with horror. For the time being she forgot her own suffering, and as she watched the reeling form of the sick man, her revulsions of feeling turned to the deepest sympathy and pity for him. But she could do nothing to alleviate his suffering, and her appeals to the outlaw in the man's behalf were answered with brutal jests.

They rode slowly on, and finally turning to the right, made their way to Fawn Lake, where they drew rein to encamp for the night.

The outlaw assisted Sackett to dismount, but the moment the sick man's weight rested upon his feet he sunk down in a dead faint, and was left lying where he fell; but presently the outlaw brought some water from the lake and poured a few drops into his mouth and sprinkled some on his face.

The Indians, after learning who the stricken man was, became excited and vengeful, and but for the interference of the outlaw, whose mandates with them were law, he would have been slain.

"No, no, Pawnees," the villain demurred; "we need this fellow, and if we can revive him and get him to the village it will be worth a great deal to us. Paul Sackett, the ranger, more than all others, is a thorn in our flesh, and there's but one fellow living I'd exchange him for, and that's Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero."

This seemed to pacify the red-skins, and after disarming Sackett and searching his person for whatever he might have about him, arrangements for the night's bivouac were made.

The horses, including that of Sackett, were tethered out to grass, about three hundred yards from camp, on the opposite side of the grove, and a guard was stationed at a point where he could watch the approaches to camp, although they seemed to have little fears of pursuit.

A fire was lighted and some slices of antelope, killed during the day by one of the Indians, broiled for supper. The captive girl partook of the savory meat, for hunger was fast telling on her delicate strength.

After Sackett recovered from his swoon the girl was given permission to administer to his wants. She brought him a sup of water and broiled him a slice of meat from which he sucked the juices with apparent good relish. Then he laid back and seemed to rest easier, and soon falling asleep, a blanket was thrown over him.

A little bower was constructed of bushes for the maiden, into which she retired shortly after darkness had set in, but she was compelled to submit to the indignity of having her feet bound together—an Indian tying a knot that defied her feeble strength to untie.

The outlaw and the savages being tired, then put out their fire and laid down, though the outlaw, before doing so, had again to allay the growing restlessness of the red-skins' spirits by promising them that if the sick man was not able to travel in the morning they should have his scalp.

There was a moon but its rays did not penetrate the deep, dense shadows of the grove.

Tired and weary as she was, the captive maiden could not sleep. Her thoughts went back to her home on the Platte—to her friends—her father and mother, whom she knew to be wrought to distraction over her disappearance. She could hear the heavy breathing of her captors, the piping of the crickets, the low fluttering of the forest leaves in the night wind, and the gentle murmur of the waves chafing the shore. But all these sounds seemed to intensify the peculiar silence and loneliness that surrounded her in her helplessness, and the longer she listened to them, and the more she brooded over her troubles, the more wakeful she became, until, finally, she arose with a start to a sitting posture. As she did so her face came in contact with something that moved—something possessed of life. It was the first intimation that she had of the presence of any living thing within the little bower.

Her first impulse was to cry out, but she was so completely paralyzed with terror that she moved not a finger nor did she utter a sound. She listened. The slightest sound would have been a relief to her, for every nerve in her body was strung to such a tensity that it seemed ready to snap asunder. Her patience was finally rewarded by the voice of some unknown intruder whispering the admonition:

"Keep mum, little gail! I'm your friend," and then again she felt that object touch her face, and she knew at once it was a human hand. But whose hand? The thought found expression in a low whisper:

"Who are you?"

"Your friend," was the reply; "that's enough. Here's a knife; cut your bonds, then crawl out here, soft as the play o' a zephyr. The red-skins are all sound asleep, and thar's a show fur escape if you make no noise."

The maiden knew she could not make her situation worse; so she took the knife, severed the bonds that bound her ankles, then crept from the bower and rose to her feet.

A hand grasped her gently by the arm and drew her away, while a voice at every step whispered words of encouragement or caution in her ear. Noiselessly, almost as shadows, the two moved away through the gloom of the grove, and it was the greatest relief to the maiden when her rescuer finally halted, saying in a low tone:

"I ruther guess we've give 'em the slip, gal, and now we want to mount a pair o' lively hosses and shin out o' this vicinity."

"Then you have horses near?" the girl ventured to ask.

"A pair o' them, my pretty little lady. I crept up onto the red-skin that was watchin' them, and I knocked him so cold he never kicked; then I 'propriated his knife—the one you severed your bonds with—and selected a pair o' the best-lookin' hosses already saddled, and they're in waitin' a leetle furdur on. And oh, by the sanctified Moses! won't them red-skins and that outlaw get up and paw the dirt when they find what's happened?"

"Oh, sir, I'm afraid they'll kill that poor sick man!" said the maiden, excitedly.

"Who war he, child?"

"The outlaw called him Paul Sackett. If it was Paul Sackett, he is a noted ranger," answered the girl.

"Well, it's too bad for him, but I guess he'll come out all right, little one; but now, if you're rested, we'd better move on."

So saying they moved on, and finally came to where two horses were hitched. The maiden was assisted to the back of one, while her rescuer mounted the other and led the way through the grove, leading the girl's horse.

Soon they reached the open prairie, where the moon's mellow light flooded the billowy ocean of grass with almost the brightness of day.

The moment they emerged into the light, the maiden discovered that the horse her rescuer rode was that of Paul Sackett. But before she could speak, the man dropped back alongside of her and said:

"Thar, miss, we're in good shape."

The girl raised her eyes and glanced at her rescuer. A cry burst from her lips as she did so, for she saw that the man was the sick Paul Sackett, whose emaciated form, pale, ghostly face and hollow eyes, in the glamour of the moon, gave him the appearance of a living skeleton.

The man saw the startled look on the girl's face, and said:

"Now don't take on, my little lady, for I'm no more sick than you be, neither am I Paul Sackett. All the while I war foolishin' them red-skins, and I must say I done it superbly. I see'd 'em shortly arter they'd captured you on the White Willow and skipped round in front o' them on Fire Bug, and laid for 'em. Oh, it's not the fu'st time that we two—that's boss and rider—has played the sick and faintin' dodge on the red-skin. We're so 'constructed, gal, as to be able to do so handsomely by looking a leetle wild out o' the eyes and breathin' kind o' quick and short. Hal hal hal! I can't help but smilin' out loud when I think how the outlaw, the notorious Stonefist, will sulphurate the atmosphere when he finds we're gone."

"Well, who are you, anyhow?" the girl asked, her breast filled with joy and surprise.

"Down on the Reepublican, gal, I war called Skeleton Jack by the whites, and 'White Rattlesnake' by the Ingins. Both names are teeth-chatterers, hair-raisers and marrow-freezers, but then ye know the Bible says, 'What's in a name?' To be sure them Ingins and Dick Stonefist didn't know me, and I knew it, else I'd never risked my ole skeleton within their reach. Yes, I'm a plumb stranger up hereaways, but you can trust me, gal—any pretty gal can trust me till the cows come home— Ah! hark! by the sanctified Moses! our escape has been diskivered, and the devils are after us! Come, gal, we must ride, ride for our lives."

And away through the moonlight they sped—the fair girl and her ghostly companion, while on behind in swift pursuit rode the outwitted and infuriated foe.

CHAPTER II.

THE SCHOOLMASTER OF RED WILLOW.

RED WILLOW settlement, or post, was located on the Platte river, and at the time of which we write was composed of some fifteen or twenty families. It was a frontier settlement, and since the first man, an old hunter named Upton, had located there, all the hardships, privations and dangers of the advance posts of civilization had been undergone. First came dangers from the Indians, then from the outlaw and freebooter, but as these were gradually pushed on westward the settlement began to grow and in the course of time became a point of some local importance. It became a trading point for hunters, trappers and even the peaceably-inclined Indians. The overland emigration also contributed a share of patronage to the place.

For a while it was entirely free from evil characters, but when they began to come they came thick and fast. A man named Hardcastle—a name that soon became abbreviated to Old Hardcase—located on a little island that lay opposite the place and started a trading-post. That is, he kept a few groceries, some dry-goods, ammunition, cheap jewelry and trinkets, such as might please the fancy of an Indian, and a general supply of poisonous whisky. In connection with his store he also did a general gambling business, and since there were hunters and trappers, Indians, cowboys, and occasionally a worldly-wise overland traveler, that dared to "buck the tiger" in the "Sweet Repose," as the place was called, Old Hardcase's income was not so mean.

The honest people of Red Willow were engaged in farming and stock-raising. They made a bitter fight against the evil influence of Old Hardcase, but their efforts seemed in vain. They at once saw that in order to prevent their children from being caught up in the gradually out-reaching whirlpool of lawlessness and sin, they must take active measures against it. And they readily saw that there was no better way to begin than by building a school-house and a church, and putting them to their best use. These measures were at once carried out, and a church organized, with Rev. Gamaliel Gay as pastor. Three different young men were employed to teach the school, but a few of the older boys, who had already imbibed some of the lawless spirit of the Sweet Repose, had thrashed every teacher and turned him out before he had taught a week.

It was nearly six months then before they could get a fourth person to undertake to teach the school. A young man named Lucian Blauford, returning from the West, stopped there over Sunday, and hearing that a teacher was wanted, made an engagement with the trustees to teach a three-months' school. He was duly warned of the fate of the other teachers, but he assured them he would run the school, and he did. The "big" boys undertook to "oust" him, but they were never so surprised in all their lives when the plucky schoolmaster turned in and thrashed the whole crowd of unruly scholars until they were glad to beg for mercy. After that there was no trouble in the school, and the teacher was master of the situation there, lionized by the better class of citizens, and denounced by the followers of Old Hardcase.

Lucian Blauford was a young man of five-and-twenty. He was of medium hight and build, with a dark-brown eye, and a handsome, intelligent face. Besides his scholastic attainments, he was a fine boxer, a splendid horseman, and an excellent shot with either rifle or pistol. He was a gentleman in every sense of the word, and full of pluck and energy, and, as was soon demonstrated, he had grit to the backbone.

Besides his teaching, the young man made himself useful in every way he could. He assisted Rev. Gay in conducting a Sabbath-school, and once a week gave a free lecture at the church on some interesting topic. He helped the farmers in the field, and the stock-men with their cattle. He hunted the deer in the thickets and the antelope on the plains. He was the leader among the young people, and fond of their society—always doing something for their advancement and pleasure. In fact, there was not an hour that passed over his head when he was not asleep, but what he was busy at something. He was all life and energy, and he made himself so useful that everybody began to see the good influence he was having on the morals of Red Willow. And none felt his influence more than did old Bob Hardcase, who began to notice a material falling off in his receipts, and this, in connection with a lecture or two the schoolmaster had delivered on the subject of intemperance and gambling, led the old sinner to believe that Blauford was making a direct attack on him and so begat his enmity and ill-will.

Of course a large number of those that frequented the Sweet Repose took sides with Hardcase, and deep and many were the mutterings against the schoolmaster. But Blauford took no notice of the threatening attitude of the gamblers toward him; he went on with his duties cheerfully, fearlessly and with continued good result.

But he who felt more aggrieved by the schoolmaster was one Dr. Reuben Flick who had come to Red Willow some months before Blauford. He was a young man of thirty, and a handsome, dashing fellow, who had carried the post by storm. He soon became the leader of society there, built up a good practice, and, as he sup-

posed, won the affections of Miss Myra Burton, one of the fairest girls in the place.

But the doctor proved to be one of those persons who would not "wear," and in the course of time his following and practice began to decrease, and, to cap the climax, Lucian Blauford came and supplanted him in the affections of Miss Burton.

From that time on the physician was a frequent visitor at Old Hardcase's island, and then he was looked upon by some with a little suspicion. Blauford mistrusted him of being the author of a threatening anonymous letter he had received, but paid no attention to him or the letter, and went on about his business, treating all with fairness, without fear or favor.

Blauford had one confidant in the village—in a young Irishman called Happy Mike. He was a married man, rather intelligent, full of fun and Irish wit, and withal, a brave and true man. With him the teacher made his home, and it was there in his happy home-life—exceptional indeed—that he learned the real worth of Happy Mike Enright.

"If iver you git into trouble, b'y, count on the help and friendship of Happy Mike," the Irishman said to him one day, and with this assurance the schoolmaster felt he had a friend who could be relied on in any emergency.

Early one Saturday morning Blauford mounted his horse, and crossing the river, struck out toward the southwest, with no other object particularly in view than to see that portion of the country. No sooner was he fairly on his way than he made up his mind to visit Spring Ranch at the head of Snake Creek. It was a cattle-ranch and the head-quarters of Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero, a youth of whom he had often heard and whose acquaintance he was anxious to make.

The ride before him was fully fifteen miles, but he took no heed of the distance so deeply absorbed was he in contemplation of the scene around him.

On over the flower-bedecked plain he sped at a slow gallop. The wary antelope and skulking coyote flitted away before him through the waving grass, or watched him from some distant eminence; yet of these he took no notice.

It was ten o'clock when he finally reached the valley of Snake Creek and turned up the stream.

Up and down the valley, everywhere, he could see the sleek, fat cattle of the Snake Creek ranchmen scattered along, some at grass, some gathered in little groups among the bushes and trees that grew in places along the creek, while others stood flank deep in the water to protect themselves from the torment of the flies.

Entering a cattle-path the schoolmaster ambled along, flitting in and out of the many little clumps of trees that studded the winding stream. He was half-way between two of these *mottes* when two men suddenly appeared from the one before him. Both of them were rough-looking fellows, yet there was nothing about them to arouse suspicion. One of them carried a short whip or "quirt" with several lashes.

Supposing they were some of the Snake Creek ranchmen, Blauford drew rein, and after the compliments of the day had been passed, he inquired:

"Where do you hail from, gentlemen?"

"From up the crick," replied one of the men; "but say, mister, d'ye know your saddle-girth's 'bout broke in two?"

"No, sir, I did not," replied Blauford, and dismounting he stooped to fix the girth, when one of the men stepped up behind him and threw his arm around his neck with the grip of a constrictor, and held him firm and helpless, in such a position that he could neither speak nor cry out.

Then, quickly the second man disarmed him and bound his feet together with a piece of lariat. He was then thrown forward upon his face and his hands securely bound at his back.

As soon as he could get his breath, Blauford exclaimed:

"In Heaven's name, what does this mean?"

"Business," was the laconic reply of one of the garroters.

"You must be mistaken, gentlemen, in your man," persisted young Blauford.

"No, we're not; you're that schoolmaster that's been kickin' up so much dust over to Red Willow."

"I have injured no one at Red Willow that I am aware of, and if I have wronged any one—"

"Oh, that'll do to tell tenderfeet, but you can't ring in your fine work on old 'boomers'

like Buck Head—that's me—and my pard, Stonefist Dick."

"I repeat it," persisted the schoolmaster, "you have been wrongfully informed as to my injuring any one in Red Willow."

"Then you'd make us out liars," retorted Buck Head. "Now, Mr. Schoolmaster, we're not fools, but Regulators. We don't want to be awful hard on you 'cause your young and innocent o' the ways o' the frontier, but we've one demand to make o' you."

"What is that?" demanded Blauford, with an unflinching gaze, and an expression of scorn knotting his face.

"It is that you git up and potater!"

"I don't understand your jargon."

"Well, to use plain, flat-footed English, we'll give you jist five hours to git up and dust outen this kentry, and never under any pretext whatever, to show yourself in it again."

"And suppose I refuse to go?"

"Then you'll be severely dealt with."

"You're the hired tools of Old Bob Hardcase," declared Blauford, his eyes flashing with indignation; "I can see into your little game; but, let me tell you, I am no coward, and will not be driven from this country alive."

"Whirl him up to that tree, Stonefist, and we'll take the tuck outen him," Buck Head ordered.

Stonefist seized the helpless man and dragged him up to a large cottonwood tree that stood out about thirty feet from any other tree or from any shrubbery. Placing him against it—face to the tree—he was firmly bound there by means of a lariat passed several times around the tree-trunk and the schoolmaster's body below the waist. Then his clothes were cut and torn from his body down to the waist, and his shoulders and back laid bare.

"Say, now, d'ye see this quirt?" asked Buck Head, flourishing the whip before the prisoner's eyes. "Well, I am goin' to lay it onto your 'ristocratic back till the blood fills yer boots, unless ye promise you'll git out o' this country to once. Do you hear?"

"I hear, but I'll promise nothing," was the dogged response of the schoolmaster.

"All right; if you're that stubborn and foolish, you'll have to take the consequence, for we're bound to do our duty, and if ye want to be disgraced at the whippin'-post, all hunky. I know you're a proud-spirited young cuss, but ye don't understand the ways o' the border. Don't forgit, this whip 'll chaw yer back wuss nor a catamount. Now, I've given ye fair warnin'—will you go?"

"Not a step—I'll die first!" was Blauford's firm response.

"Oh, you think we're foolin', don't ye?" sneered Buck Head; "but if you do, be on-deceived at once for the ball's goin' to open now, soon," stepping back and raising the cruel scourge ready to strike. "Think fast and decide quick. I'll give ye until Stonefist counts one hundred. Strike in, Stonefist, and rattle off the hundred."

Stonefist began to count rapidly. Buck Head stood ready with whip upraised. Blauford fixed his eyes upon the villain, as if he defied him to do his worst.

A silence that was only broken by the counting of the outlaw reigned.

Stonefist had told off ninety, and Buck Head was just gathering his strength for the first blow, when suddenly there came the sharp hiss of something through the air—something like a pistol cracked on the side of Buck Head's face, and with a cry of agony the villain reeled, clutching at his right ear, that hung almost severed from his head, while blood ran in a torrent down his cheek.

Stonefist ceased counting, and, turning, saw a young man, or rather a boy, standing some fifteen feet behind him. He was dressed in the garb of a ranchero, and held in his hand a long whip. A stern and resolute look was upon his handsome, manly face; and a determined fire in his eyes.

Instantly Dick Stonefist recognized the boy, and the fact that it was by his skillful hand and merciless whip that Buck Head's ear had been severed. To avert a similar fate the companion-ruffian drew his revolver, but before he could use it the great whip-lash circled like a serpent above the boy's head, then shot forward with a hissing crack, and Stonefist fell like an ox in the shambles!

Whip-King Joe had spoken!

CHAPTER III.

WHIP-KING JOE, THE BOY RANCHERO.

BELLOWING with the most excruciating pain, Stonefist rolled upon the earth, blinded by the

Boy Ranchero's lash, while Buck Head, clutching at his almost severed ear, roared with agony.

The instant the lash touched him, Stonefist dropped his revolver; while, in his terrible pain, Buck Head did not think of revenge.

With a leap or two the Boy Ranchero reached the schoolmaster's side, and drawing a knife, severed the rope that bound him to the tree.

"There, stranger," he said, as he liberated him, "that lets you out."

"Thank you—thank you!" gasped Blauford, as he turned, bareheaded and barebacked, to his young rescuer. "To whom do I owe this timely rescue?"

"I'll tell you after awhile," responded the boy—"after I've given these fellows some more of the same stuff."

As he spoke, the young ranchero raised his whip, whirled it above his head, and with a forward fling of the arm the long lash stretched out through the air with a hiss, and as its end came in contact with the shoulder of Buck Head it cracked like a pistol; and as the dirt and lint flew from the villain's shirt, a yell and curse broke from his lips and he grasped his revolver, for by this time he had become fully aware of the source of his pain. But as he drew the weapon from his belt, the terrible whip again cut through the air with a spiteful hiss, and its end striking the villain in the face, knocked him down as completely as though it were a thunderbolt.

Furious with rage and frantic with pain, the half-blinded outlaw opened a random fire on the young ranchero. The latter never flinched, and, with a grim smile on his boyish face, continued plying his whip, the bark of the revolver being followed in rapid succession by the crack of the lash. But while Head shot wide of his mark, the boy made every blow count, literally cutting the outlaw's clothing from his body in patches.

"Bang" went the revolver—"crack" the whip, and this peculiar duel was continued until every chamber of Head's revolver was emptied, when the fellow leaped to his feet and ran for his life, the ranchero giving him a parting cut that fairly bounced him off the ground.

In the mean time Stonefist had somewhat recovered from his blindness, and, seeing how matters stood, reached for his revolver; but the quick eye of the lad caught his movement, and swinging his whip above his head struck at the revolver with such dextrous skill that the weapon was actually snatched from the villain's fingers by the lash; and then, before Stonefist could make a second attempt to recover the revolver, the boy brought his whip around and gave the outlaw a touch that raised him into the air. With a cry like that of a wounded hyena, the wretch turned and fled with the speed of a deer down the valley of the winding Snake.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the young ranchero, as he watched the fleeing outlaw, "go it, you cowardly jackal! Ha! ha! ha!—stranger, don't take me for a fool—can't help 't—ha! ha! ha! Lord, but that was a good one; never got in my work so—ha! ha! ha!—gracious! I'm out of—breath."

"Sir," said the astonished schoolmaster, "I infer, from the way you handle that whip, that you are Joe Blake, or rather Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero."

"That's what they call me, stranger; who are you?" was the boy's response.

"Lucian Blauford, schoolmaster of Red Willow, on my way to your ranch."

"Indeed? Well, I reckon you hav'n't been there long."

"What makes you think so?"

The Boy Ranchero smiled.

"I can tell you're not a Westerner."

"Well, you are right; I have not been in the West long."

"What's them fellers got against you that they propose to drive you out of the country for?"

"I do not know, unless it is because I have been waging a war against such brutes in Red Willow; and yet, I never saw these two ruffians before."

"They must be the henchmen of Old Bob Hardcase. That fellow is a hard party, and unless he's rubbed out he's not goin' to allow such a thing as a schoolmaster to flourish in Red Willow. But say, Mr. Blauford, I got around jist in the nick o' time to save you from a fearful lambastin', didn't I?"

"Indeed you did, Joe, and—"

"You'll know them fellows if you ever see them again, for I put my trade-mark on them both."

"You are most assuredly a whip king, my young friend," declared Blauford; "you merit the name you bear."

"It's taken a deal of practice, stranger," assured the boy, "but I guess I'm as handy with a whip as any cowboy on the range. But, say, stranger, rig up and come along if you're goin' to my ranch. I'll be glad to have you spend the day with me, for I hav'n't seen a soul but our own boys in three weeks."

Blauford adjusted his torn clothes the best he could, caught his horse which was grazing near, and mounting, joined the Boy Ranchero, who had also mounted a mustang that he had left on the opposite side of the *motte* when he went to Blauford's rescue.

As they rode along the schoolmaster studied the features of this remarkable Whip-King Joe. He saw that he was not over eighteen years of age, yet possessed of a well-developed, strong and muscular form. He had a pleasant, open countenance, a large, laughing brown eye, and a mouth indicative of a kind-hearted, fun-loving boy.

He was dressed in a suit peculiar to the ranchero. A Spencer carbine and a navy revolver hung at the bow of his saddle. The whip with which he had done such fearful execution had a short stock but a long, heavy lash on the end of which was a rawhide "cracker"—the real quirt of the cattle-herder.

From the first Blauford was favorably impressed with Joe, and as they rode along he found the young ranchero quite agreeable and intelligent in his conversation.

After riding a half-mile up the creek, Whip-King turned to the left saying:

"Let's cut across lots, Mr. Blauford; the creek makes a bend and we can save a mile or two this way."

A short ride took them from the valley to the upland, where they entered a large prairie-dog town, and as scores of the saucy little animals began their puppy cries of alarm and went scampering away and tumbling into their holes, Blauford observed:

"I always enjoyed watching those little fellows, and have never yet found heart to kill—"

"Skir-r-r-r!"

It was the warning rattle of a large rattlesnake that lay coiled a few feet ahead of the horsemen, whose animals suddenly leaped aside as if conscious of the threatened danger.

"Confound the rattler!" exclaimed Whip-King Joe, gathering up his whip-lash; "that's all I've got against the prairie-dogs—their associating with rattlesnakes and owls. But say, Mr. Blauford, I'll fix that fellow. Just watch his head, now."

Swinging his great whip above his head with the one peculiar movement, the lash shot forward and obliquely downward, and the poised head of the serpent popped into the air, cut as cleanly from the body as though done with a saber.

"Bravo! bravo, boy!" exclaimed Blauford; "I declare you *are* king of the whip. You did that job as skillfully as you did the ear of Buck Head."

They again rode on, and before they were entirely through the dog-town no less than half a dozen snakes—every one rattlers—had met a similar fate at the end of the terrible lash.

Finally the two came to Spring Ranch, which consisted of a long, low sod building divided into three rooms, and covered with dirt and sod; a stable on the right for several horses, and a cattle stockade on the left.

Dismounting at the stable, the young ranchero and his guest put up their horses, then proceeded to the house, where Blauford was cordially invited to make himself at home, while Whip-King lighted a fire in a stove and began the preparation of dinner. This occupied but a short time, notwithstanding he had broiled meat, hot biscuit and coffee and some canned fruit for their repast.

"I observe you are a good cook and live pretty well," remarked Blauford as he seated himself at the table.

"I've had years of experience in cooking, Mr. Blauford, and really think I can make a cup of coffee, a batch of biscuit or broil a steak good as any man on the range."

The schoolmaster enjoyed his meal very much, and after dinner he and his host strolled out around the ranch, finally entering a little grove where they sat down.

"Joe, don't you get lonesome here?" Blauford asked.

"No, I can't say that I do, though I like to have folks call on me. Once in a while some of the boys come up and stay a day or two and then I go down and see them."

"Then you have friends on the range?"

"There are six of us, all told, that attend the ranches. I keep this ranch and the other boys keep the Rapids Ranch and the Lower Ranch as they're called. You see, our herd is scattered from here all along the Snake valley to the Platte. We don't pretend to herd or corral our cattle at night, but let them run and watch them to see that none stray away from the valley."

"Joe, did you ever attend school?"

"Not a day in my life, but I can read and write a little. Old Bill Garner taught me that when he stayed up here one winter. You see, I've had a hard tussle of it, Mr. Blauford. My father was killed by the Ingins when I was a little kid, and mother being poor as a preacher I had to hoe into it soon as I was big enough to crack a whip. I was hired out to a Kansas man to herd cattle, and in that way I started in the business, and when mother died I'd no one but myself to care for, so I stayed on the range and finally drifted up here. I saved up my wages till I was able to buy a small interest in the herd, and—"

"Then you own some of the Snake valley cattle?"

"Yes, about three hundred head of them, and they're worth from eight to ten thousand dollars and increasing all the time."

"Good! I am glad to hear this, Joe; but you ought to go to school, my boy, by all means. It would be of great benefit to you even in your present business were you fairly educated."

"I know it, Mr. Blauford, but I don't see how I could leave here at present. My partners, who are living in the East, trust everything to me, and while they do so I'm going to do my duty."

"That's right, Joe; but look here, my boy; I'm a school-teacher myself, and I've a suggestion to make, and that is that you begin a course of studies right here at home. I'll be your instructor and furnish you what books I have of my own. Every Saturday I'll come over here and give you lessons, or else you can ride over to Red Willow."

"That's a fair offer, I'm sure," Joe assented.

"I'll charge you nothing for my services," Blauford went on, "because it will be a pleasure for me to help one so very deserving as you are, and then it will be play-spell for me to ride over here."

"By Jinks!" exclaimed Whip-King enthusiastically, "I'll accept your proposition, and agree to ride over to Red Willow every other week. When I'm away I'll have one of the Rapids boys come up and stay here."

Thus the matter was settled, and the two friends returned to the ranch. At the earnest solicitation of the young ranchero, Blauford concluded to remain at Spring Ranch over night; and so pleasant was his stay that it was prolonged until the middle of the afternoon, the next day, when he took his departure for home. Just before he rode away, Whip-King said:

"I'll be over to Red Willow next Saturday."

"All right, Joe; but I beg you will look out for those two villains that you punished so severely yesterday. They may try to get even with you."

"They'll be apt to keep under cover for a while—at least, till their gashes heal up. If you see 'em 'bout Red Willow, it will stand you in hand to be careful, for they're bad medicine. I expect I ought to have shot them."

"No, no, Joe; your conscience would not be clear if the blood of those men, villains though they are, were upon your head."

"You'll not talk that way 'g'inst you've been here a year or two, Mr. Blauford."

"Maybe not, Joe, but until we meet again, good-by."

With this they parted. Blauford rode on home at a rapid pace. It was nearly sunset when he reached Red Willow, and as he rode through the village he was not a little surprised at the coolness of those whose greetings always had been open and hearty. But he proceeded to the residence of Happy Mike, and, going directly to the stable, put up his horse, and then started for the house.

His way lay through a little artificial grove of cottonwoods, and he was about half-way through it when a timid voice said:

"Lucian!"

He turned and found Myra Burton standing before him, her face pale and her eyes red with weeping.

"Myra!" he exclaimed, in evident surprise.

"Oh, Lucian! I am so glad you came back!"

"Why, Myra, what in the world is wrong?"

"Then you have not heard the news that has shocked all Red Willow, and—"

"No, I have heard nothing, Myra," the young man replied.

"Lucian," and the girl fixed her eyes upon those of the young teacher as though she would search the inmost recesses of his heart, "two of Mr. Parker's horses were stolen last night."

"Indeed!" replied Blauford; "that makes six or eight horses that have been stolen since—"

"Since you came here," interrupted the maiden, in a tone that seemed to have a hidden meaning.

"What do you mean, Myra? Great heavens! you don't think that I have had anything to do with it, do you?"

"No, Lucian, I do not, but—"

"But what?" he almost gasped.

"Your going away has—"

"Cast suspicion on me? Well, my dear girl, I can prove where I was yesterday, last night, to-day. I can prove that I am not only innocent of crime, but that there is somebody plotting against my character, if not my life."

"Can you, Lucian?" asked Myra, smiling through her tears.

"I can prove that I was at Spring Ranch with Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero. True, it was not my intention to go there when I left home, but, meeting with an adventure that nearly cost me my life, I had to accept Joe's help and hospitality."

"Oh, if you can only make the settlers believe it! for, Lucian, they have come to the conclusion that you are here as a secret spy or agent of a band of horse-thieves."

"It is false, Myra!" exclaimed the schoolmaster, indignantly; "it is a lie that has been hatched out of the brain of some scoundrel, and I swear to God that the man who started it shall suffer for it. All I ask, Myra, is that your love and confidence may not desert me in this trying moment."

She answered by giving him both hands.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SCHOOLMASTER'S TROUBLES.

THE School Board of Red Willow called on Lucian Blauford soon after his return from Spring Ranch, and informed him of the report that was afloat, and gave him due notice that his services were no longer wanted.

The young man accepted his discharge in the true spirit of an honest man, and although he felt keenly the disgrace, he resolved to remain right there in spite of the threatenings of Judge Lynch, and, if his life was spared, prove his innocence.

Myra Burton and Happy Mike were the only two in Red Willow who believed in his entire innocence, and to whom he could go for advice and consolation. A knowledge of Myra's love and Mike's friendship for him strengthened his purpose and gave him courage.

The young man was fully satisfied, now, that he was the victim of some treacherous villain, who wished to rid Red Willow of his presence. That the whole had been concocted within the domicile, if not the brain, of Old Hardcase, he had not a doubt. The attack on him by Dick Stonefist and Buck Head was evidence of this, although he had never seen the two villains about the village or on the island.

To Happy Mike and Myra he told the story of his adventures on his way to Spring Ranch, and of the proposed visit of Whip-King Joe to Red Willow.

Pending the coming of the Boy Ranchero, Blauford remained closely in Red Willow, for, through Happy Mike, he had learned of his being watched, and that any suspicious movement on his part would be taken advantage of. But, in the meantime, the schoolmaster went to work himself, determined to ferret out the source of the conspiracy against him; and, if possible, solve the problem of the stolen horses. He was met by the scowls and curses of the people, on every side, but he quietly went along about his business, treating all with his characteristic politeness.

Doctor Reuben Flick would not speak to him, and believing that Myra had promptly discarded the fellow, called once or twice at the Burton residence that week.

The days went by and Saturday came, and bright and early that morning Whip-King Joe rode into Red Willow to become the guest of the schoolmaster, at Happy Mike Enright's.

The Boy Ranchero first learned of the trouble his friend was in from the lips of Lucian, himself.

Several of the citizens of Red Willow called on the young ranchero, and when they had heard his story of Blauford's whereabouts dur-

ing the previous Saturday and Sunday, as well as their adventures with the two villains, Stonefist and Head, they began to change their minds.

"I tell you, folks," the boy finally said, "you're all being nicely duped by some artful cusses, that ought to have the lash laid to their backs. This schoolmaster's a thorn in somebody's side right here in your village. But, if you'll just go over to Old Hardcase's retreat, and sink that pestiferous place like Gomorrah was sunk, with all its gang, you'll git rid of all the evil growing up around you, and save the name and reputation of Red Willow. For one, I'm ready to go over and help cyclone the island."

Before the day passed away sentiment had so changed in the breasts of the better class of settlers, that every one called on Blauford and begged his forgiveness, and promised him support in hunting down the scoundrels who would not only blight his good character, but take his life.

The directors wanted him to resume his school, but this he refused to do until he could bring to justice his enemies, and solve the mystery surrounding the theft of Mr. Parker's horses.

Whip-King Joe, however, received a lesson from him that day, and with a supply of textbooks returned to Spring Ranch.

Owing to the state of affairs the young ranchero concluded to come over to Red Willow the next Saturday and take lessons, rather than have the schoolmaster get into further trouble by going over to the ranch.

Blauford was perfectly willing to take his chances, but yielded to please the Boy Ranchero who, he saw, had another object besides his lessons and his teacher's safety, at heart, and that was the smiles of Miss Flavie Dalton, a pretty little maiden of seventeen, whom he had chanced to meet that day.

Day after day went slowly by and the schoolmaster assumed the role of detective, aided by Tom Dalton, a brother of Flavie, and a brave, intelligent young man of twenty. A close watch was kept on Old Bob Hardcastle's retreat and every man who went to or from the island. Dr. Flick was also kept under surveillance, for Tom Dalton, even more than Blauford, felt disposed to lay much of the teacher's trouble to the doctor.

It was finally discovered that the medicine man was making night trips away from the village, and that, too, in a very secret manner. Blauford could not understand its meaning, for he knew the doctor could not be going away in the direction he did on professional visits, for there was no one but Indians living north of them. It finally occurred to him that he might be treating the two men, Buck Head and Stonefist whom Whip-King Joe had punished so severely, and who had never put in an appearance about Red Willow. The more he thought the matter over the stronger became his conviction that this was the solution of the mystery surrounding the doctor's night riding; so he and Tom Dalton resolved to follow him the next time he went away. Nor had they long to wait, for that very night the physician mounted his pony and stole out of the sleeping village and sped away northward.

Arming themselves they at once set off to follow him, making known their intentions to no one but Happy Mike. They had traversed but a short distance when Tom Dalton was taken sick and was compelled to return home. The plucky schoolmaster, however, pushed on alone and soon was far from Red Willow; but he little dreamed that every movement he had made for a week past was noted by a spy who dogged his footsteps, and that, as he pushed his way along the valley under the blinking stars, this spy was upon his track.

Just after midnight, that very same night, the report ran through Red Willow like wildfire that Doctor Reuben Flick's two fine horses had been stolen. The theft had been discovered by the doctor, who, having been out on a professional call at the cabin of Jake Druege, visited the stable on his return, and found the horses gone; and, to add to the intensity of the excitement, the news also spread through the village, and over to the Sweet Repose, that Lucian Blauford, the schoolmaster, had disappeared from the place since dark. Tom Dalton, sick in bed, sent out word that the teacher had gone away on a hunting-excursion, though he did not say what kind of a hunting-excursion; but the rabble would not accept this story—for they said that the cunning schoolmaster had been deceiving Tom.

A meeting of the citizens was at once called in the school-house. All of Old Hardcase's fol-

lowers were present, and so loud-mouthed and vindictive did they become—setting at naught all reason and good sense, that the better class of citizens became disgusted and withdrew, leaving Old Bob and his crew to run the meeting alone.

After considerable wrangling Dr. Flick was authorized to select a party of ten men to go in search of the stolen horses. His selection was most singularly characterized, in that every man chosen was a warm friend of Old Hardcastle, while Hardcastle himself was selected as trailer for the party.

Heretofore the people of Sweet Repose had remained idle and entirely indifferent when a horse had been stolen, and the interest they now took in Dr. Flick's behalf could hardly be accounted for.

It was nearly daylight when the party left in pursuit of the stolen horses. The trail was found shortly after sunrise, going westward up the Platte. The party rode sharply forward, Old Bob at their head. At noon they halted to rest and let their horses graze.

Continuing on, they struck a large cottonwood grove about sunset, into which the stolen horses had been tracked.

"I'll bet anything our game's in this grove," asserted Old Bob, drawing rein; "and as he may be here with friends we've got to look out."

"Maybe we'd better wait till mornin'," suggested Jake Drugoe.

"What say you, men?" asked Old Bob, who had assumed the leadership.

All favored Drugoe's suggestion, and dismounting they camped in the edge of the grove.

An hour or two had gone by, and the moon had come up when the thief-hunters were suddenly startled by the tramping of horses' feet within the grove. They were approaching, and in surprise and wonder, the party sprang to their feet and grasped their revolvers.

The next moment the object of their hatred, Lucian Blauford, rode from the shadows of the grove; and, what was the most surprising to all, he was mounted upon one of Dr. Flick's horses, and was leading the other!

"Sanctified Moses!" burst from Jake Drugoe's lips.

"Halt!" cried Old Hardcastle, leveling his revolver; "halt, you thievin' son-of-a-gun, or I'll blow your brains all over Nebraska."

"Throw up your hands," commanded Dr. Flick, raising his pistol.

"Gentlemen," exclaimed Blauford, seeing the men were in earnest, and who they were, "I am no thief; I—let me explain."

"Hear the scoundrel!" roared Old Bob, "tryin' to crawl out when we've caught him right with the hosses."

"Hang him! hang him!" yelled half a dozen voices.

Blauford endeavored to speak, but his voice was drowned in the yells and jeers of the frantic mob.

"Come on!" yelled Old Bob, seizing the horse by the bit and leading it back into the grove under a wide-branching cottonwood.

Blauford remained in the saddle and shouted at the top of his lungs in his endeavors to be heard, but the rough crowd drowned his voice in their yells.

Jake Drugoe, with a rope in hand, hastily climbed into the tree, and crawling out upon the limb directly above the schoolmaster, dropped a noose around his neck.

Again the young man attempted to speak, but in vain.

The man in the tree drew up the rope, wound it about the limb, then cried out:

"All ready, Bob! Lead out the hoss!"

"One word, men, before you kill me!" shouted the doomed man.

"Speak it to the Old Scratch when you meet him," was the brutal reply of the old gambler, and then he led the horse forward from under its rider, and Lucian Blauford swung to and fro by the neck between heaven and earth!

CHAPTER V.

A MAIDEN'S PERIL.

HAPPY MIKE, the Irishman with whom the schoolmaster boarded, was anxious to accompany the party that went in search of the stolen horses, but this privilege was flatly refused him because, as it was intimated by Dr. Flick, Le-Mike—had always been so friendly to Blauford that he was half suspected of being interested with him otherwise.

This cut the Irishman to the quick, and he resolved to go anyhow, for he was satisfied that if Flick's party found the teacher—and this

they were likely to do—they would endeavor to put him out of the way. Seeking Myra Burton, the Irishman said:

"Faith, Miss Myra, and the drunken jackals wouldn't lit mees go a shtep wid them, so they wouldn't; and dom 'em—pardon mees, Miss Myra—and I'm afraid they mane to kill the young man if theys foind him."

"Oh, Mike!" cried the maiden, in dire distress, "what shall we do?"

"Lord love yer swate soul, and it's meself that don't know. Everybody but yees and mees and poor sick Tom are forinist the boy."

"Ay! Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero, is Lucian's friend," said the maiden.

"Lord bless yees! I never thought of the cowboy, the bold buccaneer of the sod, and if mees war two, I'd fly like the wind up the river and find the teacher and warn him of the gang lookin' for him, while mee other silf 'd fly to Spring Ranch for the B'y Ranchero."

"Mike," said Myra, "go look for Lucian—save him from the hands of those men, for I do not believe he had anything to do with those horses."

"Niver! divil the bit did he ever shtea a hoss!"

"Find him if you can, Mike," the girl went on, "and I will ride to Spring Ranch for Whip-King Joe."

"Can't I go along, Myra?"

It was Flavie Dalton, who, approaching unseen, had overheard Myra's words.

"Yes, Flavie, you may go with me. We have taken many longer rides together."

"And do yees know the way?" asked Mike.

"Yes," responded Myra; "I have been in sight of Spring Ranch twice; but, Mike, we are losing precious time. We alone can save Lucian, for we alone know him to be innocent."

"Yes, and divil the word must we tell to any one where wees are goin'," the Irishman decided.

"What shall I tell Whip-King Joe, Mike?"

"Tell him to strike for the Lone Tree Ford, and if I foind the b'y we'll meet him there; but if I do not, till him I'll cut the litter 'X' on the south side of the lone tree, and that'll be word for him to come up the valley as if lookin' for shtray cattle. But if I cut the litter 'A' on the tree, that'll be word for him to come down the river. And does yees understand now?"

Myra repeated his directions to make sure she understood him aright, then the Irishman left, and in a few minutes he was mounted on a little black mule, that was not only swift of foot but possessed of endless endurance, and galloping away, he determined to get in ahead of Flick's party at all hazards.

Myra and Flavie at once arranged for their journey. As it had been almost their daily wont to go riding over the prairie, assisting their friends in driving the cattle to and from the pasture range, no one questioned them. They were brave and fearless girls, such as only the frontier possessed. They were fine equestriennes, and loved the prairie and the open air with all the ardor of their young, impulsive hearts.

Saddling their ponies, they mounted and rode quietly away. Their friends saw them depart, never thinking but an hour or two would bring them back.

The day was warm, yet a soft breeze was stirring.

At a lively pace the maidens galloped away over the plain.

Two hours' riding brought them to the valley of the Snake, wherein roamed the great herd of the Spring Ranch cattlemen.

As the two fair riders sped along the winding trail, the lazy cattle raised their heads and gazed after them in dumb surprise.

Ten miles had been thus traversed when Flavie's pony stepped into a hole and fell, throwing her headlong to the earth. But with a laugh the rosy-cheeked girl was upon her feet in a moment, unharmed, nor was she in the least frightened, for it was not the first time that she had met with such a mishap in her wild rides over the prairie.

Quickly catching her pony she remounted it, but to her surprise and regret she found the animal had been lamed so that it could scarcely touch its foot to the ground.

"Oh, Myra! what in the world will I do?" the girl exclaimed, leaping to the ground.

"It is too bad, Flavie," replied Myra; "it is dreadful. I do not know what we will do. Oh, everything seems to be working against us—against Lucian!"

"Myra, let me tell you," spoke up the heroic

little Flavie. "You go on; it's not far now to Spring Ranch, and I'll wait here until you return. Dan may be better by that time, so that he can travel home."

"But are you not afraid to remain here alone?"

"Afraid of what, Myra? Those meek-eyed cows, or the chattering black-birds? No; I'm not afraid."

"Well, I will not tarry, Flavie. I will not even dismount at the ranch, if I find the Boy Ranchero. But say, Flavie, what shall I say to Whip-King Joe for you?"

"You may give him my regards," replied the maiden, a faint blush suffusing her pretty face.

With this Myra rode away and Flavie turned her attention to her wounded horse. She knew of a simple remedy for the animal's sprained limb, having often seen it used by her father. It was the application of cold water, and this she found in a little spring under some bushes near the bank of the creek. Leading the pony down to the spring she dipped the water in her hands and bathed the injured limb. This she continued for fully half an hour, when she finally arose and sought the shade of a clump of trees near. As she did so, two men came from concealment among the trees and confronted her with a rude stare and sinister smile.

A cry burst from her lips, for she knew they were men of evil hearts, and in this she was right, for one of them was the villain Dick Stonefist, the other being a younger man, but with none the less repelling countenance.

Both men bowed with mock politeness to the girl, then the younger one said:

"Indeed, I am glad to meet you, Miss Dalton."

"Sir, I do not know you!" cried Flavie, starting back.

"Ah, then I have the advantage of you, Miss Flavie; my name is Rupert Henshaw, and this gentleman is Richard Stonefist, who has confessed to me that he has known you for some time and has fallen desperately in love with you."

"It's only too true, Miss Dalton," added Stonefist.

"You are not gentlemen! you insult me!" cried Flavie, indignantly, her eyes flashing with all the fire of her woman's nature.

"I did not mean to—beg your pardon, Miss Dalton," said the outlaw, advancing toward her.

"Do not approach me!" she cried, retreating; "you are a villain!"

"She's a scorcher, Stonefist!" averred Henshaw, "and you can't coax her. You'll have to lay loving hands right hold of her and take her by force."

Scarcely was the last word out of the fellow's mouth before Stonefist sprang toward her like a wolf and seized her in his strong arms. Flavie screamed and struggled with all her strength, but she was like an infant in the burly wretch's power; and, overcome with terror and exhaustion, she fainted. When she had fully recovered her senses again she found herself reclining in the arms of the man Stonefist, who, mounted upon a horse, was riding away toward the northwest.

With a moan of despair the poor girl sunk back and closed her eyes to shut out the sight of the brutal, triumphant face of the outlaw.

Finally the villain came to a little *motte*, where he was greeted by the wild shouts of friends in waiting. Flavie turned her eyes and saw a half a dozen painted and plumed Indian warriors before her, their faces aglow with fiendish looks. The sight of them filled her soul with terror. She realized now that she was beyond all hopes of immediate rescue.

After a few minutes' halt the captive was placed alone upon the back of a pony and tied in the saddle. Then Stonefist took the lead, the captive following him, and the Indians bringing up the rear. All rode out of the *motte* and continued the journey across the plain under a fierce, burning sun.

Flavie took but slight notice of her surroundings. Her brain seemed dizzy, and she was like one in a dream.

For hours the cavalcade rode silently on. The sun crossed the line and sunk slowly westward.

Finally a cry burst from the lips of Stonefist and the party came to a halt.

Flavie lifted her eyes, and glancing over the plain saw a riderless horse some distance before them.

It was the horse of the sick man, or rather Old Skeleton Jack, by whose stratagem Flavie was rescued that night on the shores of Fawn Lake, as has already been related in the opening chapter of our story.

CHAPTER VI.

A RIDE FOR LIFE.

WE will now return to Skeleton Jack, whom, with the rescued girl, we left in a previous chapter galloping over the moonlit prairie, pursued by the outwitted Stonefist and his savage allies.

Urging on the horses with whip and spur, and speaking words of encouragement to the maiden, the old borderman seemed to defy the pursuers, who were fully half a mile behind.

After making known who he was to the girl, Old Jack asked:

"Now, my little lady, will you tell me who you are?"

"My name is Flavie Dalton," the maiden replied.

"And live down to Red Willow?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's what I s'posed; but—ha! ha! ha!—didn't I play it on 'em scoundrels in a slick, bang-up style?"

"Yes, sir, but if they should overtake us they would show you little mercy," Flavie declared.

"I don't intend for 'em to catch me, gal. You see, I figured the thing right down fine, and if the hosses hold good we'll dodge the varmints in the valley. Here we go boomin' right along and when we git onto down grades we'll raise a fog that'll confuse them lopin' sinners. But now I tell you they're comin' lickety-te-split with a whoop and a hurrah. I'll bet they're frothin' to think their sick man whose scalp was promised to the Pawnees got up and ske-daddled with their pretty litte gal-captive. But then, when it comes to rescuin' pretty gals I'm ole p'izen! I'm a reg'lar ole fool 'bout pretty gals, and can't help it—hope ye won't get 'fended at anything I say, miss, for I'm a loose-tongued rattle-trap, and jist as apt to find myself makin' love to you as any other lady. But, say, little gal, how come you in them varmints' power?"

"A friend and I started to Spring Ranch," replied Flavie, "and on the way my pony fell lame. My friend rode on, and while she was gone two white men came and took me captive. One of them carried me away and joined the Indians."

"Exactly. I was in sight when he rode into the *motte* whar the Pawnees war. I was watchin' the Ingins, and just as soon as they left the *motte* with you, I circled 'round, got in ahead, and come the sick man's dodge on them, the scoundrels."

"You risked a great deal for me, Jack," Flavie said.

"Not much, little one—only an ole hulk of a skeleton."

"But there is a brave, kind heart within that skeleton."

"Well, by gum, I'm much obleeged for the compliment, gal; but a feller's not got a heart bigger'n a pebble thet wouldn't die for a pretty gal; and—"

"Jack," interrupted the maiden, glancing back over the plain, "are those Indians not gaining upon us?"

"It does seem as though they were creepin' up on us a little bit," the old borderman said; "but be cheerful and hopeful, and soon we'll be in the Platte valley and 'll dodge 'em among the groves. Don't disremember that I'm an old dodger from Dodgerville, and—ha! ha! ha!—I'm a tempestuous old fool, too—can't help laughin' every time I think how I tricked them folks."

The old ranger, for such he was, had discovered, even before Flavie did, that the foe were gaining upon them, but he had said nothing, for all the while he had hoped to reach the river and dodge them among the many little clumps of timber along its shore. In fact, they had not ridden far in their flight before the ranger discovered that the pony Flavie rode was, in speed, the very opposite of what he had taken it to be when he selected it from among the several. And it was when he could no longer conceal the danger of the situation from Flavie, he said:

"My dear little gal, that pony o' yours is no traveler, an' it's goin' to be the cause o' gittin' us into trouble if we don't dodge the foe soon. This hoss o' mine can double-distance it, and if you know this kentry well enough, I'll let you take him and go on, and I'll roll into the grass and dodge 'em, for I'm a dodger from Dodger-town."

"Oh, sir! I would not know where to go, besides I am almost ready to fall from this pony with fatigue," the maiden responded. "You go on, Jack; if I fall into their power again, you will be free so that you can help me."

"No, no, gal, I can't leave you, knowin' you'll

soon be a captive again. But I'll tell you what I can do, seein' it's the best chance that offers, and that is to drop you in the fu'st grove we reach, while I go on with both hosses fast as I can. Do ye see that grove just ahead o' us yander! We're in the valley now, and the river is not fur beyant that *motte*. If I leave you I'll make straight for the river, plunge in, and swim across with both hosses, and git into the brush on t'other side before the red-skins git close enough to see your pony is riderless."

"But suppose the Indians should discover that I was in the grove?" Flavie asked.

"They mustn't, though; we must work it so's they won't know it, and if I succeed in eluding them, I'll circle 'round and come back to you. But you don't want to git impatient even if I don't git around afore to-morry night, for come I will. I never make a woman a promise but I fulfill it, even if it's to leave the kentry and never speak to her again."

"Jack, I can trust you implicitly," said the maiden.

They rode on and finally reached the grove in question, but instead of entering it they kept around to the right until it was between them and the pursuers. Then they drew rein, when Old Jack said:

"Now, gal, spring to the ground and run into the grove and hide yerself. We're out o' sight o' the foe now. Good-by, little one, and may the Lord keep ye safe."

Flavie sprung to the ground and glided into the shadows of the *motte* while Old Skeleton Jack putting whip and spur sped on as fast as the horses would go. He bore gradually to the left and finally appeared within sight of the pursuers again on the left of the grove, and, with a yell, the outlaw and savages pulled aside and urged on their horses at renewed speed to head the fugitives off from the river.

With remarkable presence of mind Flavie retreated into the heart of the little *motte* and concealed herself. She soon had the satisfaction of hearing the Indians go thundering down to the left of the grove, and as the sound of their horses' feet died away in the distance she realized that the eccentric old ranger's ruse had proven successful, and she began to breathe an air of relief. But a sense of her loneliness now began to impress itself upon her mind, and a vague feeling of fear and uncertainty disturbed her breast.

An hour or more went by when the painful silence was broken by what seemed the tread of horses' feet at the lower end of the grove. The maiden thought it must be Skeleton Jack returning, and to enable him to find her without calling, she arose and crept softly through the shadows toward the sound. But instead of approaching her the footsteps, she discovered, were receding. Continuing carefully on, however, she had reached the edge of an opening in the grove where the moonbeams fell to earth when she was startled by the sound of excited voices.

At first she thought the Indians had returned and intercepted Old Jack and her heart sunk in her breast. She listened with bated breath and discovered that she was mistaken when she heard the curses and jeers of the white men. A moment later a man leading a horse and followed by several other men appeared in the moonlit space. A man was upon the horse. The girl recognized him as Lucian Blauford. And foremost among those on foot she saw Old Bob Hardcase, Dr. Reuben Flick and others from Red Willow.

The maiden heard the words of the excited, frantic mob. She heard the cries of vengeance against the young schoolmaster and the latter's attempts to speak. She saw that the young man was doomed.

Like one rooted to the spot, the maiden stood and gazed upon the scene, her very soul sickening at the sight. Her first impulse was to cry out—appeal to the mob for the life of her teacher, but her tongue was paralyzed.

She saw a man climb into the tree under which they had halted, and a moment later she saw a rope dropped about Blauford's neck. Then she saw the horse led away and the man swing to and fro in mid-air.

The feeling that seemed to paralyze the poor girl's heart, and the burning thoughts that rushed like lightning through her brain were indescribable.

"Oh, where is Whip-King Joe? where is Happy Mike—some one to save the life of Lucian Blauford?"

These were the questions that flashed through her mind, and, as if in answer, she beheld a vivid tongue of fire stream from the darkness on the left, followed by the sharp report of a

revolver and a groan from the lips of Old Hardcase who, staggering forward, fell under the swaying body of Blauford. And in quick succession—like the darting tongue of a monster maddened serpent—that deadly revolver in ambush spit forth its flame with scarcely an intermission between each flash, and at every report a groan of agony was blended with the tumult of the moment. In a few brief seconds half of Hardcase's party lay writhing in the throes of death, while the survivors fled into the darkness to escape a similar fate.

As the last one vanished from sight, a lithe figure glided from the bushes with a smoking revolver in each hand, and ran to where Blauford hung, saying:

"Steady, me brave b'y, and it's meself that'll put yees on yer trotters again!"

Flavie Dalton recognized the voice, as well as the face, as that of Happy Mike Enright.

But before the brave Irishman could raise a hand to assist him, Blauford dropped to the ground, and standing erect and unharmed upon his feet, put out his hand, saying:

"Welcome, Mike, old friend, thrice welcome!"

The schoolmaster had liberated himself from the noose, for, as the horse was led from under him, there was no fall of the body, and throwing up his hands that were free, he caught the rope above his head, and hand over hand raised himself to the limb, over which he threw his left arm while he removed the noose with his right hand—his would-be assassins, in the mean time, being too busy in saving their own lives to interfere with him.

All this had transpired in a few brief moments—so quick, in fact, that Flavie scarcely realized the truth of the situation; but when she at length did, she uttered a cry of joy and rushed from her concealment into the presence of the schoolmaster and the Irishman.

"Oh, by the Virgin! a apparition!" burst from Mike's lips.

"My God! it is Flavie Dalton!" exclaimed Blauford.

"Oh, mother of Moses! and what in the name o' the Adorable does this mean, Flavie, me darlint little friend?"

Before the maiden could answer, the wild, unearthly yells of savages and the sharp report of firearms came from the direction of the river, and, reeling back into the shadows, she cried:

"Come, Lucian—Mike! Quick! the Indians will find us!"

Stepping over the lifeless body of Old Hardcase, the schoolmaster, followed by his faithful friend and rescuer, disappeared in the gloom of the grove with the maiden.

CHAPTER VII.

A VILLAIN FOILED.

MYRA BURTON, after leaving Flavie with her crippled pony, rode rapidly on, and finally reached Spring Ranch, the home of the Boy Ranchero. The door of the cabin stood slightly ajar, and riding up to it, the maiden rapped smartly upon the jamb with her riding-whip, but no one answered her.

"Whip-King is gone," she mused, as a sigh escaped her lips, and then she began to wonder what she should do—what she *could* do.

After a few moments' reflection she rode to the top of a little knoll back of the ranch, from where she had a commanding view of the surrounding plain; but she could see no one—nothing but a few cattle along the bluffs overlooking the Snake valley.

Sorely distressed the maiden rode back to the cabin, and dismounting, looked in at the partly opened door. She reasoned with herself that he could not be far away, else he would have closed and locked the door; but presently she happened to think that it was a custom among ranchmen to leave their doors open when they went away, as a silent invitation to the wayfarer to enter and make himself at home.

Seeing a number of books and some writing-paper on a rude table near a little window, it was suggested to her that she write and leave a note for the Boy Ranchero, and then hurry back to Flavie. So she hitched her pony and entered the cabin. She found a pencil, and seating herself at the table began to write, but suddenly she stopped, and as she passed her hand over her brow, her thoughts found expression in the words:

"What if Whip-King cannot read?"

Her eyes fell upon a copy-book before her. She picked it up. At the head of each page was a line written in the neat handwriting of Lucian Blauford, and the page beneath the copy was filled with writing almost as good as the

teacher's. Fully satisfied that it was Whip-King's chirography, the maiden continued her note. She indited a detailed account of the new trouble at Red Willow—of the theft of Flick's horses, and the pursuit of the thief; the dangers that threatened the schoolmaster at the hands of Old Hardcase's mob, her and Happy Mike's belief in Blauford's innocence—finally ending with an appeal to the young ranchero to go at once in search of Blauford and warn him of the danger that menaced him should he fall into the hands of Hardcase's party.

To the note she signed her name, then she laid the paper on the threshold of the door, with a silent prayer that it might be found by the one for whom it was intended.

With a vague uneasiness she mounted her pony and began her homeward journey, her heart growing sadder and her mind more distressed at every step.

Strange as it may seem, she was scarcely out of sight of the ranch ere Whip-King Joe came galloping over the plain from the north. He rode to the stable and put up his horse, then started to the house. As he approached it he saw strange pony-tracks in the path and glanced quickly around him. Nearing the door, he saw the book and paper lying on the threshold, and then he stopped and his hand sought the revolver at his side. He thought of Stonest and Buck Head, and it occurred to him that they might be concealed in the cabin waiting to have satisfaction on him.

After a few minutes' hesitation, he advanced and picked up the paper. Glancing over it, he saw the name of Myra Burton upon it. Eagerly and anxiously he read the page—he read it over the second time, then he turned and glanced out over the plain with a startled expression upon his boyish face.

"Can this be true?" he asked himself. "Has Myra Burton been here? Is there no one but Happy Mike at Red Willow to stand by Lucian Blauford? By heavens! that schoolmaster's no thief! He's being persecuted to death by some villain, and I will go to his assistance, as asked in this note."

Folding the paper, he placed it in the book, and at once got ready for the trip over to the river. He buckled his cartridge-belt around him, proceeded to the stable and saddled his horse. To the bows of the saddle he hung a Spencer carbine and a navy revolver. He provided himself with a blanket and some food, for there was no telling how long he would be out. He also procured his great cattle-whip—his inseparable friend of years—and coiling the lash threw it over his shoulder. Thus armed and equipped, he mounted and rode forth in the direction of Lone Tree Ford, from whence he was to shape his course under directions of Happy Mike.

His mind filled with many conflicting thoughts, the youth galloped along, taking but little notice of his surroundings.

Mile after mile was left behind him, yet with that same steady gait he rode on, sitting his horse like a young centaur, the rim of his sombrero, flared up across his forehead and his brown face flushed with excitement.

The sun was within two hours of the horizon when he reached a little chaparral through which ran the trail he was following. Here he drew rein and dismounted to give his horse a few minutes' rest and to appease his own hunger. He led the horse back into the thickest of the grove, where they could have the benefit of the coolest shadows, for the day was exceedingly hot.

He had scarcely finished his repast when he was startled by the sound of clattering hoofs.

Quickly he sprang to his feet. His horse pricked up its ears. The young ranchero quickly seized the animal by the bits to prevent it whinnying.

The next moment he caught sight of an approaching horseman who bore in his arms a living burden—a human being; but before the youth could act the rider sped past him on a foaming, panting horse. The burden he held in his arms was that of a woman, and even in the partial glimpse he had of her white, terror-stamped face, the youth recognized the features of Myra Burton.

Involuntarily a low cry burst from his lips, and the blood leaped in hot currents through his veins. A glance at the man's face told that he was a villain, and the course he was pursuing with the girl told that he was carrying her away into a captivity worse than death.

The Boy Ranchero quickly seized his carbine, but before he had time to use it the intervening trees concealed the outlaw from his sight. But

not to be outdone, he quickly replaced his Spencer at the saddle-bow, leaped upon his horse and gathered the reins in his left hand, while in his right he seized his trusty whip. Then putting spurs, he plunged out of the thicket after the horseman.

The latter—who was the man Rupert Henshaw, who had laid in wait for Myra on Snake Creek near where Flavie had been captured—heard the Boy Ranchero approaching, and with a startled look glanced over his shoulder. Discovering the youth almost upon him, he dropped his rein and supporting Myra's form with his left arm, he drew his revolver with his right hand, but before he could use the weapon he heard a sharp "swish" and a "crack," and at the same instant he received a blow on the side of the face that seemed to rend every nerve and muscle—forcing a cry of pain from the villain's lips and causing him to reel in his saddle like a drunken man. A torrent of blood poured from the gash cut by the cruel rawhide lash in the villain's cheek.

Believing he had been shot, the outlaw pointed his revolver back over his shoulder, and, without turning his head or endeavoring to check his flying horse, fired a random shot at Whip-King Joe.

The bullet fired by the outlaw whistled ten feet above the boy's head and before the ruffian could repeat the shot the young king of the whip cut him across the eyes with his lash, and with a howl of the most terrible agony the villain dropped his captive to the ground, for he was now in darkness—blinded by the unerring blow of the lash.

Seizing the reins the wretch endeavored to make his escape, but in his pain and blindness he became confused and bewildered and turned his horse from the course he was pursuing and rode directly toward the Boy Ranchero.

The latter, however, supposing he had turned to give him battle, quickly drew his revolver and fired, when the outlaw, with a moan and a violent fling of the arms, fell from his saddle, dead.

Dashing alongside the now riderless horse the Boy Ranchero captured it, then hastily returned to Myra.

The maiden had been partially stunned by her violent fall to the earth, but by the time Whip-King Joe was enabled to give his attention to her she was on her feet and as the young ranchero came up, discovered for the first time who her rescuer was.

"Oh, Joe!" she exclaimed, as the boy dismounted; "isn't this terrible?"

"It's awful, Myra," the youth replied, "but the worst is over with. I thank the Lord I happened to be in the right place at the right time to save you from that villain's power. I got your note, Myra, and started at once to the assistance of your friend—"

"Indeed?" exclaimed the maiden, her face brightening up, "then you understood it, Joe?"

"It was plain enough, Myra; and I presume you were captured on your way home?"

"Yes, Joe; but I fear this is not all. I am afraid Flavie Dalton was captured, also."

"Flavie Dalton captured! by whom, Myra?" exclaimed the boy.

"By a friend of the man who captured me. Flavie started with me to your ranch, but her pony fell lame, and she was compelled to stay back in the Snake valley. When I returned to where I had left her she was gone, but her pony was there. While looking for her that villain came out of the brush and seized my horse by the bits and dragged me from my saddle. He told me my friend was in the power of his friend, whom he called Stonest—"

"Stonest Dick!" cried the Boy Ranchero. "Great God! he is the worst villain out of the dominion of— But, Myra, do you know where he took Flavie?"

"I only know what my captor told me."

"And what was that?" impatiently.

"That I should meet my friend—that Stonest had gone on ahead with her while he had waited behind to capture me."

"And how much the start of you did he say they had?"

"He did not say, but if Flavie was captured soon after I left her they have had hours the start."

The Boy Ranchero almost groaned in spirit. He glanced westward. The sun was not more than an hour high. What should he do? He asked himself the question over and over. Already Myra was in his charge while Flavie Dalton and Lucian Blauford were no doubt in need of his help.

Myra seemed to have read the youth's thoughts, and finally said:

"Whip-King, do not let me detain you here. I will take one of the horses and try and make my way homeward."

"Myra, I am afraid to let you go alone. See, the sun is almost down, and you could never make your way across the plain after night."

"Then leave me somewhere, Joe, and I will await your return."

"No, no; I cannot do that either, but I'll tell you, Myra, you can ride on with me until we reach the Lone Tree Ford of the Platte. It might be such a thing that we'd meet Happy Mike and Lucian there."

To this Myra readily consented, and a few minutes later she was mounted on Whip-King's horse and the young ranchero on that of the dead outlaw—both making their way across the plain toward the northwest.

It was dark when they reached the Platte valley, and two hours later they came to Lone Tree Ford. Crossing over the stream they approached the Lone Tree with eager, anxious hearts. But they found no one there. Whip-King dismounted and examined the tree. On the upper side he found the letter X freshly cut in the bark.

"That means for me to go on up the stream," said Joe.

"Yes," replied Myra, her voice betraying her deep disappointment. "And, Joe, if you will let me, I will go with you."

The young ranchero leaped into his saddle, saying:

"There is less danger in you going with me than in remaining here or attempting to go home alone."

So the two rode on up the river. The moon came up, flooding the valley with its mellow light.

Here and there lay little *mottes* of timber, dark and grim.

But the Boy Ranchero kept clear of them all through fear of lurking danger.

Suddenly the far-off yell of human voices fell upon the ears of the boy and maiden. They quickly drew rein.

"I declare it sounded like the yell of Indians," said Whip-King.

"Oh, I hope it was not!" replied the girl.

They listened, but heard nothing more. The Boy Ranchero dismounted, and dropping to his knees laid his ear to the ground. He listened for several moments, then sprang to his feet, saying:

"I hear the sound of horses' feet. They appear to be approaching, and that— Ah! there goes that yell again!"

A yell that left no doubt of its coming from savage throats came quavering through the night.

"Oh, Whip-King!" cried Myra, "it is the yell of Indians!"

In an instant the youth was in the saddle.

"Let us move toward the river," he said, and turning they rode on at a gallop.

They soon came to the stream, on whose banks, in the shadows of some bushes, they drew rein.

Scarcely had they done so when from his concealment Whip-King saw a horseman with a led horse at his side coming directly toward him, while far in the rear he could see a number of other horsemen, whom he knew to be savages, in swift pursuit.

"Some fellow's in trouble, sure," said the boy.

"It may be Lucian," said Myra, her thoughts ever with the young schoolmaster.

"Myra, remain here and I will intercept him," said Whip-King. "I know he is a friend else he would not be pursued by savages, though I must confess that I did not dream of a hostile Indian in this country."

So saying he rode out of the grove as the fugitive came up. At sight of him the latter bore to the right as if to avoid him.

"Hullo, there, stranger, who are you in such hot haste?" called out the Boy Ranchero.

The fugitive turned toward the youth, and soon drew rein before him saying:

"I'm in a dence o' a hurry jist 'bout this time, stranger—my name's Skeleton Jack, the—"

"The White Rattlesnake!" interrupted the boy.

"You bet you," was the laconic reply.

"I'm Whip-King Joe, the—"

"Boy Ranchero?"

"You bet you."

"Well, you'd better fall in with me, boy, and hump yerself out o' this—eight or ten p'izen redskins are after me hot and heavy."

"Ay! but I have a lady friend in the grove behind me."

"The nation you have!—well, I dropped a

gal back in yander *motte* and am tryin' to dodge the red devils. Tell your gal to stay where she is and keep cool and you come on with me for the red-skins have seen you, I know. We'll dodge 'em and get back after the gals."

"Go, Whip King, go," called out Myra from the grove, for she had overheard the old ranger's words.

Without further speech the youth whirled his horse and galloped away at the side of his newfound friend, Skeleton Jack, of whom he had often heard.

Straight toward the river they rode, soon reaching its bank, over which they leaped their horses into the stream.

"Keep 'em movin', boy," shouted Old Skeleton Jack, "or they'll go down in the quicksand—come along here, wither yer dasted picture."

The last remark was made to the panting pony the ranger was leading, for the animal could scarcely make its way through the water and yielding sand-bed of the river.

Finally, when near the middle of the stream, the pony, floundering in the water, fell, jerking the rein from the ranger's hand.

"Cuss the critter, let it swamp," exclaimed Old Jack.

Leaving it in the stream to make its own way at leisure the fugitives pressed on and reached the opposite shore just as the pursuers plunged into the river.

"Say, boy, be you much on the fight?" asked Old Jack of his companion as they galloped away.

"You can try me, Jack," was the boy's reply.

"I war jist thinkin' we could lick them critters now if you can handle that iron o' yours to good advantage."

"I can do my part, I assure you."

"Then let's make for yon *motte*, and under cover o' its shadows give battle."

They turned toward the *motte* in question, and were soon within its shadows. Drawing rein they quickly dismounted, hitched their horses and advanced to the edge of the grove to meet the foe.

Not until the savages were within fifty paces of the grove was a shot fired; then Old Jack with his revolver, and Whip King with his carbine, opened upon them. Two savages tumbled from their horses at the first discharge, and the others became panic-stricken in an instant—believing they had run into a deadly ambush. Turning their horses' heads they fled—some to the right and some to the left, thus dividing their force.

The ranger and ranchero kept up their firing as long as the foe were within sight, then, turning, they remounted their horses and rode back to the river and recrossed. But they were scarcely across the stream ere they discovered that the Indians were again in pursuit of them.

"Wither their souls!" exclaimed Old Jack, "we've got to drill a few more o' them afore they give us up."

They rode up to the grove in which Myra had been left. The maiden, who had been on the lookout, seeing Whip King, rode out to meet them.

"Come, Myra," the young ranchero said, "the Indians are still after us. This man is the noted ranger, Skeleton Jack. He left Flavie in a *motte* out in the valley before us."

The three galloped sharply across the level valley, the foe following on mad with rage over the loss of their friends.

The grove in which Flavie had been left was but a short ways off when the fugitives discovered several other horsemen bearing down upon them at right angles to their course from the north; but whether they were friends or foes they could not tell.

Approaching the grove the ears of the fugitives were suddenly greeted with the stern command:

"Halt, there!"

CHAPTER VIII.

IN A QUANDARY.

INSTANTLY the three fugitives drew rein, and Old Jack, who was in the lead, yelled out:

"Who the 'tarnal sin be you in there?"

"And faith, and it's meself, and Misther Blauford, and the chick, Flavie."

"Happy Mike, the Irishman!" cried Myra; "oh, Mikel!" and leaping from her horse the maiden ran toward the grove from the shadows of which emerged Happy Mike, Lucian Blauford and Flavie Dalton.

Happy indeed was the meeting of the friends there under the moonlight. Whip-King Joe

threw himself from his saddle and advanced to meet Flavie, with all the happiness and joy of an impulsive boy lover depicted on his face. All seemed to forget in the excitement of the moment, the danger that surrounded them except Old Skeleton Jack. Turning slightly in his saddle, the old ranger saw, to his surprise, as well as to his relief, that the savages had drawn rein, and that the unknown party coming from the north was bearing away in the direction of the red-skins.

"My dear girl," said Blauford, as he stood gazing down into the wearied face of Myra, "I have just learned from Flavie of your noble effort in my behalf in riding to Spring Ranch for brave Whip-King Joe. You and Flavie encountered greater dangers than I was in myself."

"And faith and that may be true," said Happy Mike, "but when yees swung by the neck awhile ago, mees thought yees war in a close place, me b'y."

"Swung by the neck?" exclaimed the Boy Ranchero. "What, do you mean to say you've been hung, Blauford?"

"Yes, sir, I do. Old Bob Hardcase's crowd overtook me, or rather met me, and proceeded to string me up without ceremony."

"For what?"

"Stealing Dr. Flick's horses."

"What reason had they to think you stole them?"

"I had the horses in my custody at the time they met me, but I didn't steal them. On the contrary, I followed the fellow that did steal them and recovered the horses, but the thief got away. I had started home with them when I met Old Bob's gang and come within an ace of being hung for my pains. But for Mike, I rather think—in fact, I know—I would have been a dead man by this time. Mike came up in the nick of time, and the way he tumbled that mob was a caution to evil-doers. Old Bob and two or three of his gang are now lying dead back in the grove."

A little cry burst from the lips of the Boy Ranchero and his friends, Myra and Old Jack.

"And what became o' t'others o' the gang?" asked Skeleton.

"They fled as if from the vengeance of Heaven."

"By the sin o' Adam! then that's them as have rid down and joined the Ingins on the plain out yander. I thought them fellers rode like white men. Well, now, folks, you can jist bet we're not safe as if we war in Fort Laramie. Them red varmints and white cut-throats will employ every means that savage cunning' and white man's expedients will suggest to lay us out."

"There's not a doubt of it," declared Whip-King Joe. "An epidemic of general deviltry seems to have broken out all along the Platte, and there's got to be some promiscuous shooting done."

"I am sorry, my friend," protested the schoolmaster, "that my presence at Red Willow is the cause of all this."

"Fiddlestick, friend Blauford!" exclaimed Joe; "you are no more the cause of this than you are responsible for the innate villainy of Old Bob Hardcastle or Dr. Reuben Flick. They only found it convenient to make you an excuse to carry out some programme hatched up on the island. I am sure the attempted abduction of Myra and Flavie is no fault of yours; therefore, I'd advise you to free your mind at once of the wrong you are doing yourself."

"Thank you, my brave boy," replied Blauford, gratefully.

"If we can git the drop on Dr. Flick," continued Joe, "I feel pretty sure we'll be rid of the moving spirit in this trouble, though I must confess that the fact of the Indians taking a hand in with them puzzles me somewhat."

"Perzactly," put in Skeleton Jack, "but then trouble from the Ingins has been suspected some time. In fact, I war dispatched a week ago to look after red-skin movements by the Government, and that's what brings me into this kentry. The Pawnees and the Sioux have been threatenin' each other some time, and if they once git to knockin' each other the whites that happen in the way will git pounded, too. But you can figure big on me tsayin' with you folks long as I can help you."

"Judging by what you have already done for us, I should consider you a valuable acquisition to our little party," said Blauford.

After some further conversation the party decided to spend the night there in the *motte*. It was not deemed advisable to venture out in the face of the dangers that menaced them until daylight should relieve the way of the hidden

dangers that might be concealed under the shadows of night.

Old Skeleton Jack kept a sharp watch on the little group of horsemen out on the prairie. They seemed to be undecided as to what course to pursue, but after an hour's consultation, the old ranger saw them withdraw in the direction of the river.

Instead of this giving him relief it made the ranger all the more uneasy. As long as the foe were in sight he knew exactly what to do and expect, but when out of sight he knew not in what quarter nor at what time they might pounce down upon them.

Everything possible was done for the comfort of the two girls, but so happy were they in the presence of those whom they loved that they were only too glad to share with them the wakeful vigils of that night.

Skeleton Jack proved himself a genial companion. He kept up the spirits of the party by a constant flow of whimsical talk, interspersed with flashes of wit and humor. Nor was Happy Mike found wanting on the occasion in his characteristic happiness of spirit.

The night wore slowly away, and as soon as it was light Old Jack made a reconnoissance in the direction of the river, and discovered several white men and savages encamped on a sand-bar in the middle of the stream. This left no doubt in the ranger's mind that the followers of Old Bob Hardcase had joined the red-skins, and that they would make common cause against him and his friends. As the odds were against them three to one, the ranger readily foresaw that great danger menaced them. He had not a doubt but that the foe would remain quiet until they began their retreat from the grove and disclosed the weakness of their force.

The want of provisions would compel the whites to move at once. This Jack knew and regretted, for had they been in a condition to remain under cover of the grove they might have defied the foe.

While the old ranger was pondering over the situation with the enemy in view, he suddenly discovered a herd of antelope coming down the valley like the wind. In the movement of the animals there was, to the experienced plainsman, something suspicious; but without stopping to inquire into the apparent flight of the herd, he leaped to the ground and commanded his horse to lie down.

The trained animal quickly obeyed the order, stretching itself at full length in the tall grass. The next moment the head of Old Jack had also disappeared.

The antelope came on, unwary in their flight—unaware of the presence of a new danger until the old ranger suddenly sprung to his feet and shot one of them dead.

"Meat, by the sins o' Adam!" exclaimed the ranger, "and thar's no need o' starvin'."

He spoke to his horse, and the animal arose and followed him to where the dead antelope lay.

Lifting the animal in his arms Old Jack threw it across the withers of his horse and, holding it there with his left hand, he was in the act of springing into his saddle when a demoniac yell greeted his ears.

Looking back in the direction of the river he saw that the red-skins and whites, whom he had found in camp on the sand-bar, had crossed to the mainland on horseback and were charging down upon him.

Springing into his saddle the ranger put spur, though he bung on to his antelope with the desperate determination of a starving man. He was fully two miles from his friends, while less than eighty rods separated him from his enemies, but he had the utmost confidence in his horse, notwithstanding the double burden it bore.

The race became an exciting one; Old Jack's friends had heard the Indian yell and hurrying to the edge of the grove witnessed the scene.

Whip-King Joe, Happy Mike and the schoolmaster at once placed themselves in position, rifles in hand, to receive the foe as soon as they came within range; but this was not to happen, for suddenly a wild, unearthly yell rose from the north of the grove, and glancing in that direction our friends beheld at least a hundred mounted Sioux warriors charging down toward them, brandishing tomahawks, rifles and lances frantically about their plumed heads.

Where they had come from seemed a mystery, so suddenly and unexpectedly had they burst upon their view.

Even those in pursuit of Old Jack were unaware of their presence until they uttered their yell, but the very instant the blood-curdling cry of the Sioux greeted the ears of the Pawnees,

the latter and their white friends turned suddenly aside and themselves became fugitives.

Old Jack rode on to the grove and drew rein before his startled, terrified friends. A grim smile was upon his thin face—a stern look in his wonderful eyes, as he said:

"Folks, we're in for it, now. Them are Sioux and it's no use to kick against that horde. We've got to make the best of it and trust to the great Jehovah. The Sioux and Pawnees are at war, and—"

"But we're out of the pan into the fire," concluded Whip-King Joe.

"Here they come," cried Old Jack; "keep cool, now—make 'em believe you're glad they've come—play it fine, folks, deception is in order under the circumstances—hurrah! yoop-peel big Ingin, Sioux!"

The old ranger pulled off his hat and swung it wildly about his head, while one yell after another, in exact imitation of the Sioux war-whoop, peeled from his lips.

In less than two minutes more all the Indians, except a dozen or two who had gone in pursuit of the Pawnees and their white allies, had surrounded Old Jack and his friends, wild with excitement and curiosity. They were all in war-paint, and brandished their weapons in a threatening manner in the very face of the four white men, while they gazed upon the two shrinking girls with a sensuous, impudent grin that caused their very hearts to shudder.

CHAPTER IX.

A REMARKABLE DUEL.

OLD SKELETON JACK could talk the Sioux language quite fluently, and was thereby enabled to make his and his friends' position understood from the very first. But Running Elk, the chief in command, was a wary savage, and as he had taken the war-path for enemies' scalps he was loth to accept the stories of the old ranger.

The red-skins all dismounted and gathered closer around the whites. The finding of the dead bodies of Old Hardcase and two of his friends called for an explanation from Old Jack, which was given with a coloring that had a bearing favorable to himself and friends.

It was quite a while, however, before the red-skins had ceased their menacing conduct, that was evidently calculated to provoke the whites into some signs of fear, and put away their weapons. Running Elk, in granting the whites temporary protection, informed them that they must lay aside their weapons. This Jack communicated to his friends, who at once, with apparent willingness, complied with the request, though the fear of treachery was strong in their breasts.

Old Jack was permitted to skin the antelope he had killed, and after reserving a quarter for himself and friends, gave the rest to the Indians. He then lighted a fire and broiled a portion of the meat sufficient to appease the hunger of the little party of captives, for such they now regarded themselves.

Running Elk sat near, smoking his pipe, when the whites sat down to their simple repast. Old Jack noticed his glances, and knowing something of Indian nature—of the weak as well as the strong points in his character—said in a whisper to Flavie Dalton:

"Say, little one, carry the chief a slice o' meat and offer him. It will tickle him immensely, I expect."

The maiden, with trembling heart, arose to comply with the ranger's suggestion. She selected the choicest slice of meat and advanced toward the chief.

"Now," said Old Jack aside to Whip-King Joe, "if the chief refuses to take that meat our scalps 'll not be wuth a cuss—ah! he takes it!"

With a savage smile the chief received the meat from the maiden's hand, and laying aside his pipe began devouring it like a hungry wolf.

A low, sullen murmur escaped the lips of the savages who saw their chief accept the meat from the pale-faces. A look of disappointment clouded their hideous brows.

The chief looked up and with a snarl rebuked his warriors for their conduct.

Old Jack saw that they had gained one point in the favor of the chief, but by keeping his ears open he could hear things said among the warriors that made him uneasy. He knew the chief could not watch each and all of his followers, nor could he be responsible for the acts of his braves when on the war-path.

So the four men were very careful and took no notice of an occasional sly act of some warrior calculated to provoke trouble; but Old

Jack, as well as Lucian Blauford, saw that there was a Vesuvius of rage smoldering in the breast of the Boy Ranchero and were in constant fear lest it burst forth in its fury.

The Indians themselves seemed to have noticed, by his expression, that the young ranchero was in no amiable mood, and one young warrior in particular made it a point to follow the boy whenever he went beyond the chief's sight. This Whip-King did not fail to notice, though he did not let it appear on the surface.

Finally the young warrior approached the ranchero and, reaching out his hand, took hold of the heavy cattle-whip which, so far, he had been permitted to retain and which hung coiled over his left shoulder and under his right arm. The end of the lash had been so tucked in around the coils of the main lash that the red-skin's attempt to remove the whip proved a failure.

"You'd better keep your hands to yourself, red-skin," the boy warned, fixing a threatening look on the meddlesome warrior.

But the red-skin either did not understand him or else wishing to provoke him to some act of violence, drew his knife and attempted to cut the whiplash. This was more than the Boy Ranchero could stand, and, with the quickness of lightning—without the least warning—he drove his fist into the Indian's face, knocking the fellow, half stunned, to the earth.

A yell rose from the lips of those who witnessed the blow, and in an instant a score of tomahawks were drawn, and but for the timely interference of Running Elk, the Boy Ranchero would have been chopped down.

Bleeding at the nose and mouth, and with a fearfully battered countenance, the Indian rose to his feet and gazed around him in a dazed sort of way, as if in doubt as to what had struck him.

The wildest excitement now prevailed, and in a few moments the whole of the Indian party had gathered about the bloody-faced warrior and Whip-King Joe.

Old Jack made his way through the throng to the side of his young fellow-captive, and began to plead his cause to the chief. But he saw that Running Elk was angry, and that it would be nothing but a miracle that could save the rash and fearless ranchero from the vengeance of the savages.

"The pale-face struck one of my warriors," declared the chief, with a sullen frown.

"I know it, chief," replied Old Jack, "but your warrior provoked the blow."

"The pale-face should remember he is a captive in the camp of Running Elk. The warriors have privileges that their captives have not. The pale-face has insulted Crow-Eyes, and Crow-Eyes must wipe out the disgrace of the pale-face's blow, or forever quit the war-path and join the squaws and papposes of his tribe."

This was a law of the tribe, and Old Jack found, after half an hour's argument, that there was no appeal from it, and so he informed Whip-King of the chief's decision.

"What d'ye perpose to do, Runnin' Elk?" the old man asked. "D'ye 'low to let Crow-Eyes jump onto the pale-face boy and carve his liver out, and bang his hair, and give the boy no chance?"

"The pale-face struck Crow-Eyes with his naked fist," replied the chief, "and that, too, when Crow-Eyes held a scalping-knife in his hand. The pale-face will be given a chance for his life, but he must fight Crow-Eyes with the weapon with which he insulted him—his naked fist."

"And will Crow-Eyes fight him that way, too?"

"Crow-Eyes will fight with the knife he held when the pale-face struck him."

"That gives your side a big advantage, chief," said Jack.

"No more so than when the pale-face provoked the trouble," replied the chief, "so let the white man prepare to fight Crow-Eyes."

Old Jack turned and communicated to Joe the edict of the chief, from which he knew there could be no appeal.

A grim, contemptuous smile curled the lips of the Boy Ranchero.

"If they'll give me a fair show even then," the boy said, "I'll not complain if that Ingin gets in his work on me."

"They mean to make a show of fairness," replied Old Jack, "but ultimately they mean to have all our scalps, 'less it is the gals,' and them they'll carry off captives. But see, they're formin' a circle for the fight now. Boy, you've got a nasty affair on your hands. Unless you break the red-skin's neck the fu'st blow, you'll have trouble."

"I only hope Flavie and Myra will not be permitted to witness the fight," said Joe.

"Lord only knows what the red devils 'll do," said Old Jack.

The arrangements for Crow-Eyes to wipe out his disgrace were soon perfected. A large ring was formed on the north side of the grove, and the Indians stationed around it.

Crow-Eyes and Whip-King Joe were then led into the ring and stationed about forty feet apart, facing each other, the Indian with his murderous scalping-knife clutched in his hand, and the boy empty-handed—the former with a sinister, demoniac expression on his bloody, swollen face, the latter wearing a calm, fearless and determined look.

The Boy Ranchero was informed that at a signal from Running Elk the two were to close in combat, and while he stood waiting for this signal Old Jack noticed that the boy's fingers toyed nervously with the great whip, which, for some unaccountable reason, the foe had not taken from him. It is true, Old Jack had heard during the night of the marvelous feats of the boy with the whip, but that it would avail him anything now he never once supposed. In fact, he thought no more about the whip than did the Indians seem to care about it. That it was to play a part in the coming contest neither Jack nor a single savage ever dreamed until it was too late to stay the skillful hand that wielded it.

Standing erect, with his eyes upon the chief, watching for the signal for the contest to begin, the Boy Ranchero continued toying with the lash, but the very instant Running Elk gave the word, his hand grasped the short, heavy stock, and in a twinkling the whip was uncoiled from his body. In the mean time the savage was gliding toward him, and when half across the arena the young ranchero made one leap forward, at the same time swinging his whip above his head and driving the lash forward with terrific force into the red-skin's very eyes.

As if struck by a thunderbolt the savage went down, a frightful scream of agony pealing from his lips and his knife dropping from his hand.

A bowl of rage burst from the lips of the savage spectators.

The warrior rose upon his knees, blinded by the cruel lash, the blood pouring from one of his eye-sockets.

"Great sin o' Adam!" exclaimed Old Skeleton Jack, aside to Lucian Blauford, "he's cut the varmint's eyes out! Saltpeter won't save the boy's life now!"

Instantly a hundred tomahawks were drawn, and with the fierce, murderous looks of malignant devils, the savage horde surged toward the brave boy. But at the same instant a wild, fierce yell arose from the plain south of the grove—a yell that caused the Sioux to recoil from the presence of Whip-King Joe, while their hideous visages assumed a look of startled fear.

CHAPTER X.

RED AGAINST BRONZE.

"THE Pawnees! the Pawnees!" burst from the lips of the startled Sioux, for well did they know the war-cry of their old-time foes.

Forgetting the suffering of Crow-Eyes—stopping not to mete out vengeance to Whip-King Joe, the red-skins glided away to the south side of the grove, closely followed by the Boy Ranchero and his friends.

Near the center of the grove they were met by the maidens and their savage guard hurrying away from the approaching danger.

Reaching the southern extremity of the grove the Sioux beheld a sight that almost threw them into a panic. It was their friends who had gone on in pursuit of the Pawnees and whites returning pursued by fully a hundred and fifty Pawnee warriors.

All were mounted and riding up the valley like a fierce whirlwind—yelling like demons.

Running Elk quickly gave the command to prepare for battle. The foe were too close upon them to think of flight even had they wished to escape a conflict.

"Boys," said Old Jack, "we've got to fight with our Sioux captors on the account o' the gals."

"Fight it is, then," said the Boy Ranchero.

"To the death," added the schoolmaster.

Turning, all four of the whites deliberately walked to where the savages had stacked their arms, grasped their weapons, and hurrying back took their position in the ranks with their captors.

It happened that Whip-King Joe found him-

self on the right of the chief, Running Elk—within reach of the Indian's arm, but the chief no longer looked upon him with that vengeful light in his eyes.

Kneeling in the edge of the brush, the Boy Ranchero was the first to fire a gun at the approaching foe. His shot elicited a wild, triumphant yell from the Sioux, for a Pawnee was seen to tumble from his saddle as the gun rung out.

This shot was immediately followed by a second one, then from all along the edge of the grove the guns of the Sioux began to ring out, and the battle became general, for, by this time, the Pawnees had come within a few rods of the grove, opening fire as they approached.

To the Sioux the attack was almost a surprise, and the first shock of the Pawnee assault came nigh routing them. But, being on foot, they were enabled to load, aim and fire more accurately than their enemy, so that the slaughter of the latter was frightful.

Up to and into the grove the Pawnees charged, and as soon as they found themselves face to face—hand to hand—with the Sioux, they drew their tomahawks and endeavored to ride down and chop down their foe. A desperate struggle now ensued. The Pawnees had the advantage in numbers, but the Sioux the advantage of position.

Whip-King Joe, Lucian Blauford and Happy Mike fought in silence, yet with all the desperation of brave men. Nor was Old Jack less valiant. His voice could be heard amid the din of battle, uttering one wild Sioux war-whoop after another, and wherever the old borderman went, there the battle seemed to rage the fiercest.

Not a breath of air was stirring, and the sulphureous smoke from the Sioux rifles hung low on the air like a dense fog, and in the midst of this partial gloom the conflict raged.

Over two hundred savages went into the battle that was confined to a narrow limit, and demons never fought as they did. The earth was soon strewn with dead savages and horses; shouts, shrieks, groans, the crash of guns and pistols rent the very heavens.

Inch by inch the Sioux were driven back. No one noticed this quicker than did Old Jack. Full well he knew that the defeat of the Sioux meant death to him and his friends.

Once the old ranger was in the act of going to the girls and spiriting them away while the savages were engaged, but so close were the Sioux being pressed that he was afraid that the withdrawal of a single able-bodied man might result in defeat and death. And so he kept his post, and fought away like a Trojan.

For fully ten minutes the battle raged. Half those that had gone into it were down, dead or dying. Old Jack noticed the Sioux finally begin to waver, and every moment he expected to see them turn and flee in confusion.

But to his utmost joyous surprise, at the very moment he expected utter defeat, victory crowned their efforts—the Pawnees, all of a sudden, becoming terror-stricken and fleeing from the field, leaving their dead and dying behind them.

The Sioux were themselves astounded by this unexpected turn in the tide of battle, and it was several moments before they seemed to realize the truth of the situation. When they did, the most frightful yells of triumph burst from their lips. They did not attempt to follow the fleeing foe, but with tomahawk and scalping-knife they began the butchery of the wounded Pawnees. The sight of so many of their dead and wounded braves lying on the earth seemed to drive them into a mad frenzy, and every cruelty that savage ingenuity could conceive was visited upon the unfortunate Pawnees.

Old Jack and his three friends, who had come through the battle unscathed, grew sick at sight of the inhuman, revolting treatment of the fallen foe, and turned away and went in search of Myra and Flavie. To their surprise they could find the girls nowhere. They searched every foot of the grove that had not been drenched with savage blood, but without avail.

"My God! where could they have gone?" asked Whip-King Joe.

"Maybe they fled into the prairie," suggested Blauford, whose powder-begrimed face wore a look of great uneasiness.

They walked out to the edge of the plain and glanced around, but they could see no sign of human life save the fleeing Pawnees.

"What on 'arth 'll we do, boys?" said Old Jack, for the first time appearing at a loss as to what course to pursue.

"Surely those mad devils will not persist in

regarding us as enemies, after what we have done," Blauford observed. "We deserve their help and protection now."

"We'll soon see," said the Boy Ranchero; "you can't tell anything about an Indian."

"No, sir, for if them Pawnees only knowed it, they had us Sioux whipped," said Old Jack. "But as to the girls, I've an idea they fled into the prairie and that the Pawnees have got them."

"And it's like enough," said Happy Mike, "for bliss me soul if I didn't see Dr. Flick and Jake Drugoe wid the Pawnees, and it's meself that shot two blessed toimes at them, but they war 'way in the rear where cowards flight, and divil the one of 'em did mees kill."

"Ah! here comes Running Elk See! his girdle is full of dripping Pawnee scalps!"

With his savage face flushed with victory, the chief approached the whites, saying:

"The pale-faces have got no scalps, but they kill many Pawnees."

"True, chief," said Skeleton Jack, "we put in our best licks for victory, but the pale-faces 'll let the Sioux do the bangin' o' Pawnee hair. Chief, that was a bloody fight."

"Many Sioux braves have fallen, but the scalps of the Pawnees are many more. There will be many empty lodges in the village of the Sioux, but many more in the village of the Pawnees."

"But, chief, I am afraid the Pawnees have got the two pale-faced maidens," said Old Jack. "They cannot be found."

A look of surprise, followed by one of disappointment, passed over the face of the savage leader.

"The pale-faced maidens shall be rescued," he assured. "They shall not brighten the lodges of the Pawnee chiefs."

"We're glad to hear you say that, Running Elk, for the maidens are dear to us," responded Old Jack; "but say, chief, we have fought side by side with your braves. We have killed many Pawnees; you have eaten meat at our camp-fire; now, are you our enemies?"

"The pale-faces have been the enemy of the Sioux," the chief replied; "they have invaded his hunting-grounds and slain many of his warriors, yet the Sioux's heart is not stone. Running Elk saw the young pale-face there kill the first Pawnee. He saw the pale-face fight side by side with his braves. He is not the enemy of the four pale-faces—he is their friend. They are no longer his captives. They are free to go and come. The Sioux that dares to harm them shall die. Running Elk has spoken."

From that time forward the four white men were treated as guests instead of captives. The trouble between Crow Eyes and Whip-King had been settled by a Pawnee hatchet, for, during the conflict, the unfortunate Crow-Eyes had been brained.

It was fully an hour before anything like quiet reigned in the grove, and before the Sioux had fully counted their loss and ascertained their demoralized condition. Half of their warriors were dead or wounded. A great many of their ponies had been stampeded. Not a drop of water was to be had to allay the thirst of the wounded. The river was two or three miles away on the banks of which the Pawnees had halted.

Old Jack called a conference of his friends. Running Elk was invited to be present and accepted the invitation.

"We must not remain idle, boys," said Old Jack, "while the fate of those girls is unknown. The chances are that they are in the hands of the Pawnees, yet they may be concealed somewhere on the prairie."

"Well, what do you propose we do?" asked Blauford.

"Search the prairie roundabouts durin' the day, and then, if they can't be found send out a scout or two to reconnoiter the Pawnee camp. Now, I've figured the thing down to this point, so far as them Pawnees are concerned; the fact that they war not pursued by the Sioux war a tacit admission o' their weakness to do so, and the red devils hev gone into camp over on the river to keep us Sioux away from water and force us to break camp, when down they'll pounce on us again jist as soon as they diskiver our weakness."

"The pale-face speaks the truth," replied the chief, who understood English quite well. "Running Elk will help the pale-faces to rescue the maidens. He will send out a scout when the pale-face goes—one that will count the number of the Pawnees as they sit by their camp-fires."

After some further conversation Old Jack and Whip-King Joe mounted their horses and,

accompanied by Running Elk's favorite scout, Creeping Wolf, rode out into the prairie in search of the girls.

All the while the Pawnees were in plain view over on the river, and the three scouts finding no trace of the maidens on the prairie, ventured off in the direction of the hostile camp. The enemy permitted them to come within eighty rods, then a score of them quickly leaped upon the backs of their horses and gave pursuit.

Returning to "Massacre Motte," as Old Jack named the grove where the bloody conflict had taken place, they sat down to await the coming of night.

And a long and painful waiting it was. To Whip-King and the schoolmaster the sun never seemed to move so slow. Perhaps their impatience grew out of their anxiety for the safety of the maidens, Myra and Flavie.

But at length night came and again Whip-King Joe and Old Jack left the Sioux camp, this time going on foot. They moved away toward the Pawnee camp, and after an hour's travel reached the river above the encampment.

Several camp-fires marked the location of the savages, but Old Jack thought that they might only be a blind to lead their foes into the belief that they intended staying there when their real intentions were to steal away.

"It'll be dangerous work, lad," said Jack, "gittin' close enough to see whether the gals are in camp, but if I can't do it no one can. I'll jist lay this old frame on the 'arth and snake myself along inch at a time till I git thar. I want you to wait for me right here and don't go to gittin' oneasy. I'll promise to be around before daylight and maybe not a minit sooner. Keep yer eyes and ears peeled for you must remember the Pawnees are jist as cute as we are, and 'll be on the scout for jist sich fellers as we be."

"All right, Jack, I'll wait. I hope you will get back safely," Whip-King remarked.

Without further words Old Jack took his departure and soon the Boy Ranchero was seated alone in the tall grass, his mind busied with the events of the past day and in speculating on those of the future. And amid all his thoughts the face of Flavie Dalton was ever before him.

CHAPTER XI.

OLD SKELETON'S DARING FEAT.

AN hour or more had passed when he was suddenly started from his meditations by the sound of horses' feet. He glanced in the direction whence the sound came and in the moonlight saw a half-score of horsemen coming up from the Pawnee camp. Crouching low he kept his eyes upon them and when within a few rods of him he saw that two of them were women. As they rode past him, within a rod of where he lay, he recognized the faces of the women as those of Myra Burton and Flavie Dalton. At the side of the one rode Dr. Reuben Flick, and at that of the other the villain, Dick Stonest; while behind the four rode six Pawnee warriors.

In an instant the boy took in the situation. The girls, as captives, were being spirited away under cover of night.

The spirit of the impulsive boy was at once aroused. The blood leaped in fiery currents through his veins, and never stopping to consider the odds against him, he sprung to his feet and drawing his revolver, bounded away after the foe. In a few moments he came up with them and at once opened fire upon the savages, two of whom tumbled from their ponies at the two first shots.

The yell of the red-skins and the report of the revolver alarmed the camp and in an instant almost every camp-fire was put out as if by magic.

Headlong into the very midst of those with the captive girls Whip-King Joe dashed, never halting until he had seized Dr. Flick's horse by the bits and presented his revolver at the villain's breast. But before he could fire a savage spurred his horse forward and the animal striking him, knocked his hand aside and the weapon was discharged in the air. Then, before the young ranchero could recover himself, three savages, sliding from their ponies, bore him to the earth and after a desperate struggle made him a prisoner.

Meanwhile Dr. Flick and Stonest galloped away with the maidens, while the savages at camp came rushing in a body to the scene of the boy's capture.

Whip-King was looked upon by the Pawnees as a scout from the Sioux camp, and the feeling against him was bitter. His hands were bound

at his back, his weapons all taken from him, and then with jeers, taunts and even blows, he was driven down into camp where he was given to understand, by a half-breed who spoke English, that he was to be burned at the stake as a Sioux scout and spy.

This information did not in the least unnerve the brave boy. Rather than beg for mercy at the hands of such miserable, detestable wretches, he made up his mind to die. In fact he knew enough of the Indian to know that any attempt to explain matters, or ask for mercy would be regarded as evidence of weakness that would only prolong his torture. For Flavie and Myra's sake he would willingly have submitted to anything that would have given him his liberty and freedom, for he somehow felt that the lives of the two girls, in a measure, depended upon his life and assistance.

A fire was lighted and fed with dry brush and driftwood gathered along the river. As its light revealed to the captive boy the hideous faces of the demoniac foe and the work of planting a torture-stake, his feelings were anything but pleasant. Yet in the face of all this he had hope. Old Skeleton Jack, he knew, was at liberty, and would leave nothing undone in his behalf. He had the forces of Running Elk, whom he believed he could command, to aid him if necessary.

Near by the captive saw three wounded savages lying. They had been wounded in the fight during the day, and their groans were a horrible accompaniment to the revengeful murmurs of the seething mass around him. To the right of the wounded warriors lay three or four motionless forms covered with blankets. A protruding hand told that they were dead—had died since they had left the battle-field. And look where he might, nothing but the presence of death stared the boy in the face. Even the moon and stars seemed to have disappeared and a wall of darkness to have been built up around and over them just beyond the radius of the camp fire's light.

The work of planting the torture-stake approached completion. The savages were gathering in a circle about the captive, their faces aglow with devilish triumph, and while every eye was thus turned toward the center of that circle, one of the hitherto motionless forms lying at one side covered with a blanket arose from amidst the dead, wrapping the blanket around it and over its head as it did so, completely enveloping face and form from sight.

Unseen by the eye of a living savage it moved down, and pressed and crowded its way through the circle of excited warriors, and, advancing to the side of Whip-King Joe, said in the Pawnee tongue:

"Pawnee warriors, this man is not your enemy!"

Then the shrouded figure put out his hand, in which he held a knife, and cut the captive's bonds.

A murmur of surprise ran around the circle of savages. The intrusion of the cloaked figure had been so sudden, so silent, so bold that the red-skins were, for a moment, dumfounded. And that moment of surprise and inactivity proved to Whip-King Joe a golden opportunity that he did not fail to avail himself of, and whirling, he lunged through the circle of savages followed by his rescuer, like a lion through the jungle.

And then it was that the Pawnees discovered that they had been the victims of a cunning trick—a bold deception, for, as the intruder turned to flee, the blanket fell from his head and form and they just caught a glimpse of Old Skeleton Jack as he disappeared in the darkness.

Instantly a sharp, fierce yell pealed from fifty throats, and, as a single man, the whole band of warriors swept away in pursuit of the whites, their yells growing louder as they advanced until the very night seemed alive with infuriated demons let loose from the infernal region.

"Look out for the guards, boys!" exclaimed Old Jack, as they dashed away down the river.

Just south of the camp, yet within the line of sentinels, the Indians had left their ponies. They were confined within a small space, some being picketed and others tied to these.

Straight toward the animals the fugitives made their way, and as soon as they were among them Old Jack fired his revolver thrice in quick succession, at the same time uttering a yell that so frightened them that a general stampede ensued; and as the ponies tore away like a whirlwind Old Jack yelled:

"Grab a tail, boy, grab a tail!" and suiting the action to the word the old ranger seized a passing pony by the tail and in a twinkling was

carried from the sight of Joe. The latter, not to be left, seized a frightened pony by the mane and, half-carried, he was hurried away in the midst of the flying herd down apast the line of the sentinels and out into the plain. Incumbered by the load clinging to its neck, the frantic pony was left a short way behind its mates, and finally it began a desperate effort to free itself from the grasp of the boy by a series of wild lunges. But the Boy Ranchero proved himself more than a match for the frantic beast, and suddenly, with the agility of a cat, he threw himself upon its back and urged it on in its mad flight.

The yells of the pursuing Pawnees soon died away in the distance, and when the young ranchero realized that he was again safe, his thoughts turned to his rescuer, Old Jack, from whom he had become separated. But satisfied that he was able to take care of himself under most any circumstances, he got his pony under control and shaped his course toward the Sioux camp, where in the course of an hour or two he arrived to find Skeleton Jack there awaiting his coming.

CHAPTER XII. OFF IN PURSUIT.

WHIP-KING JOE'S return was hailed with joy by his three friends, for from Old Jack had Blauford and Enright learned of his capture and doom to the torture-stake.

"God bless you, Jack," said the young ranchero, as he grasped the old man's hand, "you ran a narrow risk of your own life to save mine. How on earth did you get into that camp unseen?"

"Crept in while the Ingies war all swarmin' off to whar you war captured. I jist snuggled myself down between two dead Pawnees, pulled the blanket over all and laid thar till my sarvices war needed. But say, did ye git a 'tail-hold' on a pony? Hal hal hal! I speculate them Pawnees are chawin' their tongues and poundin' their fool selves for gittin' tricked outen their boy-roast. But, Joseph, how in the nation did you git into that mess?"

"Why, soon after you left me a party of horsemen rode out of the camp, going north. They passed by me in a walk. Dr. Reuben Flick headed the party. At his side rode Myra Burton and—"

"No, you don't say so?"

"I do, Jack, and behind them rode Dick Stonefist and Flavie Dalton and still behind them followed six warriors."

"Great hounds of perdition!" exclaimed Old Jack.

"This is terrible, terrible," said Lucian Blauford, in deep emotion.

"And what became of them?—where'd they go?"

"I do not know," continued Joe; "I saw that the girls were being spirited away, and I determined to rescue them if possible. I downed two of the savages, but before I could shoot Flick, I was ridden down and pounced upon by several savages, and made prisoner. The others rode away, and I presume, went on north."

"That settles the question as to Reuben Flick's character. He is in league with the savages, and is, no doubt, an agent of Dandy Dick's band of horse-thieves," said Blauford. "Boys, what shall we do?—what can we do?"

"Follow them—follow them to perdition!" exclaimed Whip-King.

"That's the true way to tell it," said Old Jack; "boy, you're a hull mess o' backbone and spunk."

"But do you suppose the Sioux 'll give us permission to leave?" asked Blauford.

"We're all solid with Running Elk," said Jack. "I jist told him 'bout our stampedin' the Pawnees' horses, and he had to go off and git fourteen warriors to hold him together, he war so gigantically tickled. Wouldn't wonder if these Sioux don't make it nasty for them Pawnees afore this excursion's over with."

"Shall we go now in pursuit of Flick, or wait till morning?" questioned the schoolmaster.

"Start at once."

"But can we follow their trail in the night?"

"We can guess at it near enough. They'll follow the old Eagle Trail, and make for the hills on the head-waters o' the Niobrara."

"Then let us be off," said the impatient Boy Ranchero.

Old Jack sought Running Elk, and made known to him their intentions, to which the chief did not demur, and in a few minutes more they were mounted and galloping away toward the north.

As Dr. Flick did not have over two or three hours the start, they had high hopes of over-

taking him before daylight, and if not within that time, before he reached the fastnesses of the foot-hills at any rate.

As Old Jack had predicted, Dr. Flick took what was known as the old Eagle Trail leading across the open plain up as far as Fawn Lake. His party, including the captives, numbered ten persons when they left the Pawnee camp, but the revolver of Whip-King Joe had reduced that number to eight. The Pawnee chief had given his white friend six of his best warriors as an escort, and after the death of two of them at the very start, he declined to further weaken his force by supplying the dead braves' places with others. Dr. Flick, however, did not tarry on his account, but pushed on, satisfied now, since the capture of Whip-King Joe, that he would have little trouble to contend with. He knew the Pawnees had out scouts watching the Sioux, and that the latter would not be permitted to follow him with impunity.

The captives were down-hearted and sad. All hope had vanished from their breasts. So great had been their terror that a kind of an indifference or mental stupor seemed to numb their whole being, and they rode quietly along with but a vague sense of their surroundings.

Dr. Flick endeavored to cheer them up by assuring them that no harm should befall them and that they should be returned to their homes. But the girls knew as well as he did that he was lying. They knew that instead of going toward Red Willow they were going directly away from it.

Steadily on over the plain for hours they rode. They finally neared the place where the evening before—near Fawn Lake—they had come upon Old Skeleton Jack, lying in the grass, when Stonefist said:

"Right out here, Doc, is whar that old graveyard of a cuss played his little spell of sickness on me last evening."

"Well, we'll see that no more sick spells are played from this on," replied Dr. Flick; "but say, Stony, what d'ye think 'bout halting for an hour or so on the lake-shore to rest up and take breakfast? It'll be a long ride to water after we pass Fawn Lake."

"I know it will, but the gals seem to be standing it first rate, and as long as they keep up spirits we'd better keep up traveling."

"All right, then—on we go," assented the doctor.

But they had not ridden far when a cry burst from Stonefist's lips, and on looking back Flick saw that Flavie Dalton had fallen from her pony and lay like one dead upon the earth.

Stonefist was soon off his horse at the girl's side, and lifting her head which fell limp upon her shoulder, he exclaimed:

"By sin! I guess she's killed!"

A cry burst from Myra's lips, and springing from her saddle she ran to her little friend's side, and kneeling, clasped the maiden around the neck, crying out to Stonefist:

"Go away! go away! let me have her—you have murdered the innocent girl! Oh, my poor, dear friend! Flavie! Flavie! Oh! do not die!"

Holding her face down against that of the motionless girl, Myra burst into a low, sobbing moan.

Dr. Flick dismounted and came back. The savages sat upon their ponies, gazing in silence upon the scene.

Taking the girl's hand, Flick felt her pulse.

"She's not dead by a long shot," he said, in an unfeeling tone. "Her pulse's not far from normal."

"Well, I reckon we'll have to go into camp now," said Stonefist, "and give her a chance to rest up."

"Yes, the strain on her nervous system has prostrated her," said Flick. "We must get to the lake, for we must have water for her. There's danger of brain fever setting in, and in that case she will die, sure. We'll have to make some kind of a litter to carry her on."

Cursing the luck, Stonefist set about making a litter. An Indian blanket was obtained of one of the Pawnees. To two sides of this a couple of the longest rifles in the party were fastened, and the litter was done.

Carefully the maiden was lifted and placed upon it, and then all started for the lake.

Myra was permitted to walk, for she was tired of riding. Dr. Flick walked at her side, and endeavored to convince her that there was nothing serious in Flavie's swooning.

Finally they reached the lake. The inanimate form of the maiden was placed on a couch made of all the blankets in the party. Myra begged to be allowed to administer to her friend's wants. To this Flick and Stonefist con-

sented, but all that she could do for her was to bathe her brow and chafe her hands and temples.

It was broad daylight before she showed any signs of returning consciousness, and almost the moment she did, Myra overheard Flick and Stonefist talking of constructing a litter between two ponies and continuing their journey with the sick girl.

Turning upon them with a look of scorn, Myra said, in a voice that fairly startled them:

"Reuben Flick, are you and your companion demons? Will you dare to attempt to move that poor, dying girl across the plain under a burning sun?"

"Whew!" ejaculated Stonefist; "your pet, doctor, is beginnin' to fire up. I wish mine could jist show half that amount o' sass."

"Myra," said Flick, with a sickly smile, "you are beginning to be yourself again. I am glad to see it, and I will be only too glad to please you—"

"Do not talk to me that way, Reuben Flick!" the girl exclaimed, "for I know you."

"Ah, indeed?" he responded; "the time was when you were only too glad to listen to me, and to smile at my remarks. That was before that beggar of a schoolmaster came to Red Willow and with his Frenchy airs turned your silly head. But you must understand that I am to be trifled with no longer. By your actions—your silence, you once promised to be my wife, and I propose that you shall keep that promise."

"It is false—false as your heart, sir!" she replied, her eyes flashing with all the fire of her woman's nature.

"Well, I will not quarrel with you," Flick went on; "for it must be apparent to you, now that you are in my power, that you can expect no assistance from your gallant schoolmaster nor the Boy Ranchero. As to those at Red Willow, I defy their power to harm me when once in the hills. And so let me say, once for all, that you'd as well make the very best you can of your situation now and henceforth."

"That I will," replied Myra, a look of desperate defiance upon her pale face.

The two villains finally concluded to carry out the plan of constructing a litter between two ponies for the removal of Flavie, and had proceeded to work when one of the Indians on guard came hurrying into camp, saying in an excited tone:

"Ugh! pale-face comes!"

"Where?" exclaimed Dr. Flick.

"Out there."

"By Heavens! we must see about that!" said the doctor, and accompanied by Stonefist they hurried to the edge of the grove.

Looking southward they just caught sight of three or four horsemen sinking behind a swell in the plain, and not knowing but there was a score or even more of them, they hurried back to camp discussing the situation in an excited manner.

"If we save ourselves we'd better let that girl be. She'll be a burden to us all the time, and the chances are she'll die anyhow, for, if I'm any judge of such things, she's coming down with the brain fever."

It was Flick who spoke thus, and his words were overheard by Myra.

"I hate to give her up, by sin, I do!" said Stonefist.

"She'll be dead inside of an hour," said Flick, stooping and feeling her pulse.

"Then we'd as well leave her and git," added Stonefist.

Myra's horse was at once brought up, and the poor girl forced into the saddle.

In a few moments all were mounted and ready to start. Myra gave one long, lingering look at the face of her beloved friend, then buried her face in her hands and wept in silence.

Flick rode in advance leading Myra's horse. There was no way of keeping out of sight of any one upon the plain unless they remained in the grove, and they much preferred taking their chances on the open prairie than in the grove, for their horses had all been selected with a view to speed and endurance.

As they rode out into the plain, they beheld a horseman not over fifty rods away gallop into the grove.

"By the eternal gods! did you see that?" exclaimed Flick, turning to Stonefist.

"I did!" was the emphatic reply.

"It was Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero!"

"Do you believe it, Doc?" asked Stonefist; "do you believe it was that young demon, in the flesh?"

"I do—he's got away from the Pawnees, and—"

"By the everlasting sin!" exclaimed the outlaw, Stonefist. "I'll dye my hand in innocent blood before that boy shall look upon the face—the living face of that girl, Flavie!"

The villain whirled his horse and rode back toward the lake.

A cry of anguish burst from Myra's lips, for by the man's words she knew that he meant to kill Flavie.

A grim smile passed over the face of Reuben Flick.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VILLAIN'S REVELATIONS.

IN deep and dire suspense the return of Stonefist was awaited.

Scarcely two minutes had elapsed when the outlaw came thundering back, his face livid with rage.

"Doctor, that girl is gone!" he exclaimed.

"Gone?" thundered Flick; "you're surely mistaken, man!"

"Mistaken, the deuce! Can't I see? That girl was gone when I went back there! A pretty doctor you are to pronounce her dying. It's another Skeleton Jack job!"

Myra turned her face to conceal the smile of inward joy that passed over it.

"She can be found," Flick decidedly announced.

"Yes, and so can an ambush of Boy Rancheroes."

"Set the Indians on their trail. They'll soon run her down if she did trick us, but I can't think she did. I believe she's been spirited away."

Stonefist turned to the Indians, who stood like hounds held in leash with the fox in sight, and commanded them to search the grove for the maiden and the scalp of the Boy Ranchero.

In a moment the red-skins had disappeared in the grove, and again a dire suspense held sway over the mind and body of Myra Burton, while Stonefist sat gazing from side to side like a vulture, ever and anon giving expression to a horrible oath.

Ten minutes had passed, when suddenly the crack of a rifle rung out on the morning air and was followed by a fierce yell that Flick and Stonefist knew came from the lips of the Pawnees.

"By sin! they've struck somethin'," cried Stonefist.

"Or something's struck them," facetiously added Flick.

A few moments later another shot rung out, but there was no human response this time.

Growing impatient, Stonefist finally whirled his horse, saying:

"I'm going in there to see what's up."

He rode into the grove, and as he disappeared from view Dr. Flick said:

"I guess we will ride on, Miss Burton."

Myra noticed that his voice had changed—that he was sorely uneasy.

The doctor turned and rode along the edge of the grove at a slow walk, still leading Myra's horse.

For the third time a gun finally rung out on the air, and a few seconds later Dick Stonefist came galloping from the grove. He was leaning slightly forward in his saddle, and as he approached his friend Flick, the latter saw that his face wore a deathlike pallor and an expression of agony.

"What's wrong out there, Dick?" the doctor asked.

Stonefist made no reply. He looked at his friend with wild glassy eyes and gasped as if for breath.

"My God, man, what is the matter?" exclaimed Flick.

Still there was no response from Stonefist, whose head drooped forward while his body reeled and swayed in the saddle.

Flick started toward him, but as he did so the outlaw fell heavily to the earth.

The doctor sprang from his horse, and kneeling by his friend, saw that he was dead!

A cry suddenly startled the doctor, and looking around he saw two of the four Pawnee warriors who had gone in search of Flavie coming toward him, in great excitement. This told him that danger was upon him, and running to his horse he sprang into his saddle, and as the warriors came up he asked:

"What's the matter, Pawnees?"

"Pale-faces come—girl there all well—walk, run—pale-faces kill two Pawnee friends, then—"

He did not finish the sentence, for a bullet from an unseen rifle ended his earthly career,

and before his body had scarcely touched the ground his red companion met with a similar fate.

Dr. Flick, however, did not wait to make further inquiry regarding the state of affairs in the grove, but digging his roweled heels into his horse's sides dashed away at a furious speed, with his captive at his side.

At the same moment Whip-King Joe, mounted upon his own true animal, dashed out of the grove and away in pursuit of the outlaw doctor and his captive.

Flick glanced back over his shoulder and saw who his pursuer was. Myra ventured to look back also. A curse burst from the lips of the man—a cry of joy from the lips of the maiden.

"Myra," the villain finally said, lifting his revolver from its sheath, "I have loved you passionately—I love you still, and, true as God is above, I will kill you before I give you up—before Lucian Blauford shall have you!"

"Desperate wretch, the curse of Heaven will fall upon you!" cried Myra, bravely.

"I do not care; I fear nothing. Dandy Dick, the outlaw chief, Myra Burton, is not a coward—not afraid to die."

"What do you mean, sir?" Myra exclaimed.

"What I say—I am Dandy Dick, the outlaw! I want you to know it—know what is to be expected if my life is endangered by that fellow coming behind us."

"Ay, but your pursuer is but a boy, while you are the boasted outlaw, Dandy Dick! Why do you flee from him?"

The girl's words stung him to madness. She never dreamed that Reuben Flick could look so like a baffled demon.

Over the prairie at wild speed went the pursuer and pursued. So slow, if at all, did the Boy Ranchero gain upon them that the chase seemed a hopeless one.

After a mile was traversed.

Three hundred yards separated the two from the one.

Suddenly Flick's horse gave way in one of its hind legs, and fell back so suddenly as to unhorse its rider. At the same instant the report of a rifle came up from behind. It told him the cause of his horse's fall. It had been shot and its leg broken.

The rein of Myra's horse had been jerked from his hand, and the maiden sped on! She was fully a hundred yards away ere the villain could realize what had happened. He raised his revolver, and in rapid succession fired every chamber at the fleeing girl, but not a shot harmed her. And not until the last shot was gone did the excited, baffled scoundrel realize that by emptying his revolver he had placed himself at the mercy of the Boy Ranchero.

Myra succeeded in checking her horse after it had run fully a mile further.

In a menacing manner Flick leveled his empty revolver at the approaching boy.

When within twenty paces of the unhorsed villain, Whip-King came to a stand.

"Surrender, you miserable girl-thief, you," the boy cried, "for your little game has ended!"

"Never!" returned Dandy Dick; "you can shoot me down, but I will never surrender!"

The Boy Ranchero was satisfied the outlaw was virtually weaponless. He had seen him firing at Myra and had counted the shots. Moreover, he knew full well that, had he possessed a single shot, he would have used it upon him.

"I don't want to kill you, doctor," the boy responded. "I want to take you back to Red Willow, alive."

"Come near me," hissed the wretch, dropping his revolver, and drawing a murderous-looking dirk-knife, "and I will cut your heart out. You have got to shoot me for I will not be taken alive."

Whip-King had no desire to murder the wretch. He wanted to take him alive. He still had in his possession his big whip. He had saved it from the Pawnees' hands the night before by leaving it in the Sioux camp when he and Old Skeleton Jack went out to reconnoiter the enemy; so he made up his mind to "whip" the doctor into submission.

"Dr. Flick," he said, as he unloosed the lash from around him, "I am not going to shoot you—I don't have to, but you have got to go with me to Red Willow. Understand that, will you?"

"Never! never!" reiterated the baffled man.

For a moment Whip-King sat toying with his whip, his eyes fixed upon the face of the outlaw. Nor did the latter ever move his eyes from the face of the young ranchero.

Thus matters continued for several moments, when, all at once, with the agility of a panther,

Flick bounded toward Joe, with uplifted knife, expecting to drive the blade into the boy's body before he could get out of his way; but never was a man more disappointed, for, at the word, the ranchero's horse sprung aside, as it had often done to escape the horns of a mad steer, and, as it did so, Whip-King dealt a blow at the man with his whip, striking him across the face and knocking him down.

With a frightful oath the infuriated and baffled wretch sprung to his feet, the blood trickling from a gash on his cheek. Smarting with pain, the fellow again darted toward the Boy Ranchero, but again was that murderous whip-lash driven into his face, and again he went down. In an instant, however, the outlaw sprung up, but he now groped his way in darkness, for he had been temporarily blinded by the lash.

"Will you surrender now?" asked Joe.

"No!" fairly shrieked the villain; then, with a quick motion of the arm, he drove his knife into his own breast, and fell forward upon the earth, the blood spurting from the wound!

Dismounting, the boy advanced and bent over the self-slain ruffian.

"Old fellow, you've done for yourself, hav'n't you?" the boy said.

"Ha!" the man gasped, "if I had only killed her—Myra!"

"Better regret you have not been a better man than a worse one," said Joe, "for it's bound to go hard with you in the hereafter."

At this juncture Skeleton Jack came galloping up from the direction of the lake, and a few moments later Myra joined them.

"Dr. Flick," said the Boy Ranchero, aside to the maiden, "has given himself a death-wound. He's dying."

"The poor, miserable wretch!" remarked the girl; "but, Joe, do you know that he is the outlaw captain, Dandy Dick?"

"Mercy, no! I didn't know it—it can't be!"

"He told me he was Dandy Dick," Myra declared.

Returning to the dying villain, Joe addressed him:

"Doctor, I understand you are Dandy Dick, the outlaw."

"I am," was the man's response.

"Well, this is a surprise, or will be to the people of Red Willow. I presume Old Bob Hardcastle and his outfit were confederates of yours."

"Bob Hardcase and Jake Drugoe were the only ones who knew me, or had anything to do with my band," assured the dying doctor. "I confess this to save others who are innocent, and because you cannot harm Jake and Old Bob, for they're both dead now. Every horse that has been stolen from Red Willow was taken by Drugoe, under my directions. He run them off a few miles up the river and turned them over to Buck Head and Dick Stonefist, who run them into the hills. It was the pretty face of Myra Burton that first induced me to set up in the practice of medicine in Red Willow, and but for the coming of that schoolmaster, I would doubtless have won her hand. For awhile I had hoped to get rid of his presence by fixing the crimes of a horse-thief upon him, and exciting the people to hang him. When he left Red Willow, a few days ago, I arranged it with Drugoe to take my two horses and manage to get them into the schoolmaster's hands while he was off up the river, and while thus in his care a posse from the Sweet Repose was to intercept him and hang him. The whole plan worked well—Drugoe got in ahead of Blauford and left the horses where he could find them. The teacher took them in charge and started home with them when I, with several men, met him. In two minutes we had him swinging to a limb, but the next instant we were fired into and half our number killed. I understand Blauford escaped alive."

"You bet he did!" averred Old Jack.

For some time the outlaw talked on, but gradually his voice grew weaker, and finally he had a violent spasm that was followed by a hemorrhage of the lungs that soon ended his earthly career.

The ranchero and the ranger hollowed out a grave in the sandy soil with their knives and hands, and laying the body in, covered it over.

Then the three mounted their horses and returned to Fawn Lake, where they joined Lucian Blauford, Happy Mike and Flavie Dalton.

The meeting of lovers and friends was a happy one. Little Flavie was beside herself with joy, and between her tears and smiles told how she had fallen from the horse in an apparent swoon for the purpose of retarding the flight of her captors. And how well she succeeded in

even deceiving the "doctor," who had finally announced that she could not live over an hour or two, the reader already knows.

The day being exceedingly hot, the party did not start on their homeward journey until "the cool of the evening." They made a detour to the left, so as to keep out of reach of both the Pawnees and Sioux, and after traveling all night and most of the next day, they reached Red Willow just in time to stop a party of settlers that were about starting out in search of the missing girls.

The news of the true character of Dr. Flick astounded the whole settlement, and it breathed an air of relief when it learned of his and Old Bob Hardcase's death.

From that time on lawless characters kept clear of Red Willow, and the place grew and flourished into a prosperous town, although to-day it is known by another name.

The warmest of friendship continued between the Boy Ranchero and Lucian Blauford, and no doubt ever will.

The schoolmaster never had cause to regret going to Red Willow, despite his trials and troubles, for in the love of Myra he is supremely happy to-day.

Some years later Flavie Dalton became the wife of Whip-King Joe, then a young cattle-king of the prairies, and a nobler pair of young people never joined hands and hearts.

Old Skeleton Jack remained a few days at the settlement, then bidding all good-by resumed his journey northward to continue as a ranger and scout in the service of the Government. But he left behind him friends who will never, as long as memory lasts, forget his brave and noble deeds in their behalf.

THE END.

Half-Dime Singer's Library

- 1 WHOA, EMMA! and 59 other Songs.
- 2 CAPTAIN CUFF and 57 other Songs.
- 3 THE GAINSBORO' HAT and 62 other Songs.
- 4 JOHNNY MORGAN and 60 other Songs.
- 5 I'LL STRIKE YOU WITH A FEATHER and 62 others.
- 6 GEORGE THE CHARMER and 56 other Songs.
- 7 THE BELLE OF ROCKAWAY and 52 other Songs.
- 8 YOUNG FELLAH, You're Too Fresh and 60 others.
- 9 SHY YOUNG GIRL and 65 other Songs.
- 10 I'M THE GOVERNOR'S ONLY SON and 58 other Songs.
- 11 MY FAN and 65 other Songs.
- 12 COMIN' THRO' THE RYE and 55 other Songs.
- 13 THE ROLLYING IRISHMAN and 59 other Songs.
- 14 OLD DOG TRAY and 62 other Songs.
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